

2 New Seven
Hearts

Disney ! SQUARE ENIX

KINGDOM HEARTS

THE NOVEL



TOMOCO KANEMAKI

ORIGINAL CONCEPT: TETSUYA NOMIURA

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Vol. 2

New Seven Hearts

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Original Concept
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NEW YORK

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KINGDOM HEARTS III: THE NOVEL, VOL. 2: NEW SEVEN HEARTS

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First Yen On Edition: July 2020

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kanemaki, Tomoco, 1975-author. | Amano, Shiro, illustrator. | Baker, Luke, translator.

Title: Kingdom Hearts III : the novel / Tomoco Kanemaki ; illustration by Shiro Amano ; translation by Luke Baker.

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2020- | "Original concept: Tetsuya Nomura, Masaru Oka" | Identifiers: LCCN 2019053483 | ISBN 9781975308049 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975315306 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K256 Kfi 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019053483>

ISBNs: 978-1-97531530-6 (paperback) 978-1-9753-1531-3 (ebook)

E3-20200707-JV-NF-ORI

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Chapter 6

K I N G D O M O F C O R O N A

Chapter 6

Kingdom of Corona

RIKU AND MICKEY STOOD FACING IENZO AND AELEUS in the laboratory of Radiant Garden. The lab had once been a link to another world, but Ienzo had transformed it into a hub for all the information they had gathered.

Mickey and Riku were there trying to learn more about Replicas—artificial copies of people that could be used to house hearts. Organization XIII had previously researched the concept, and their experiments had even met with moderate success under Vexen’s leadership. Riku and Mickey knew about the chilly academic’s demise in Castle Oblivion and the events surrounding it, but they weren’t sure what had become of him after he reawakened as a human.

“What?! We’re too late?” Mickey asked Ienzo.

“Yes. Even would know all about the Replicas from his time as Vexen in the Organization. He was recompleted like the rest of us, but he didn’t regain consciousness. After Lea left, he must have woken and taken his leave,” the young man in the white coat explained. Aeolus seemed disappointed as Ienzo continued. “Aeolus here and Dilan went out and turned the whole town upside down to try and find him. But no Even.”

“That’s not good,” Mickey said as he digested this news.

Riku asked the next question. “What about his research?”

“Unfortunately, his work on the Replicas was incomplete. There may still be documents around, but all of them from before he made any significant progress.”

Ienzo had called the research incomplete, but both Riku and Mickey had met the results of his labors in Castle Oblivion—namely, a copy of Riku called the “Riku Replica.” Riku had a feeling he had run into one other Replica as well, but his memories of the encounter were hazy for some reason. Either way, he knew

his own Replica was no more.

“Do you have any idea where he might go?” Mickey asked, clinging to some small shred of hope.

“There’s no place that he could go now that he’s human. He has no means of leaving this world,” lenzo replied, then let out a small sigh.

“The dark corridors...,” muttered Mickey, half to himself.

“...are beyond his faculties and mine now,” lenzo softly added.

“But not everyone’s,” Riku said, breaking his contemplative silence. “What if Even was taken?”

Mickey raised his head. “Of course! The Organization could also use the Replicas!”

“To fill out their ranks,” Riku finished for him. Organization XIII shouldn’t have all thirteen members yet, meaning they would have a need for vessels to house hearts, too.

“We’d better go tell Master Yen Sid. And Sora, and the others, too!”

Riku nodded at Mickey’s suggestion.

I remember a conversation I had with my mother when I was just a little girl.

“Why can’t I go outside?”

“The outside world is a dangerous place. You must stay here, where you’re safe. Do you understand, flower?”

She told me why I can’t leave the tower—because the world is full of dangerous, terrible people, and she is the one keeping me safe. But what about those lights that appear on my birthday every year?

Rapunzel gazed up into the distant night sky from her window. Several lights were floating up into the heavens.

I need to see them. I need to see them for real, not just from my window.

I have to know what they are. And...I can’t help but feel like they’re meant for me.

When Sora, Donald, and Goofy landed in the next world, they found themselves in the middle of a lush, green forest. A gentle breeze drifted through the gaps between the trees, while the twittering of songbirds filled the air and soft sunlight filtered down on them through the leaves.

“It sure is a pretty day,” Goofy remarked as he peered up into the sky.

Sora gave a big stretch and replied, “Yeah, the weather is great. It’d be perfect for a picnic.”

“Why do you think we came *here*?” Donald wondered as he surveyed their surroundings. There didn’t seem to be any signs of Heartless or Nobodies.

“Got me, Donald.”

“We’ll figure it out as we go.”

Sora and Goofy didn’t seem overly concerned about the situation, and Donald wasn’t especially pleased by the fact. “Okay...,” he said.

“I’m sure we were brought to this world for some good reason, but can’t we figure it out later?” Sora asked as he walked.

“Fine with me, as long as there’s no Heartless,” Donald replied, and just then, they heard a man scream nearby. They all looked toward the sound and saw the owner of the voice sitting at the foot of a cliff, apparently having just fallen. And hot on his heels were a bunch of Heartless shaped like plants and flowers.

“Make way! Make way! Make way!” he shouted as he scrambled to his feet and charged by Sora and his friends, who in the meantime had gotten their weapons ready for a fight. Sora and Goofy didn’t seem too worried about the turn of events, though.

“You see? Soon as you mention ‘em, they show up!” Sora joked.

“There goes our picnic,” Goofy added.

The man dashed through Sora and the others, then hid behind a large boulder.

“I didn’t do it!” Donald snapped, spinning to face his comrades with an angry wave of his staff.

“S’okay. Let’s send these guys packing,” Sora said, unfazed. He got his Keyblade back into position.

“Say, since you three seem to know what you’re doing, mind if I leave this one to you?” the man asked Sora, Donald, and Goofy from his hiding place. He had a small goatee and didn’t seem much for fighting. More importantly, he wasn’t carrying anything that would be helpful in a fight.

“Yup. We’ll take care of them. Go on, skedaddle!”

“You have my thanks,” the man said, then added to himself, “The horse was enough. Don’t need any monsters on my trail.”

“The *what* was enough?” Donald quacked irritably, not quite able to hear what the man had said.

“Oh, nothing, nothing. Name’s Flynn. Flynn Rider.” The man introduced himself, then shouted, “Ohh! Watch out, they look mad!”

As he reminded them of the Heartless bearing down on them, Sora and crew charged into the mob. Watching them, Flynn tiptoed away slowly at first, then ran off at full tilt.

“Huh? Where’d Flynn go?”

Now that the Heartless had been dealt with, Sora, Donald, and Goofy were searching for Flynn.

“He skedaddled.”

Sora and Donald were craning their necks looking for him, but the only one who actually saw Flynn’s escape was Goofy. “I think I saw him go thataway,” he offered.

“Huh? But ‘thataway’ is...just a dead end.”

The direction Goofy indicated ended in a cliff face covered by ivy.

“Yeah. That’s puzzling,” said Goofy, confused. He was positive he knew what he saw.

“I say we investigate.” Sora approached the wall of rock, but it was indeed a dead end. Maybe Flynn had found somewhere else to go?

“Well, at least he got away safe, right?” commented Sora, leaning back against the wall, when—

“Hey! Now Sora’s gone, too!”

As Goofy inspected the rock face, Sora’s voice came from beyond the vines. “This way, guys! It’s a secret passage!”

The ivy had actually concealed an entrance in the rocks.

With a quick glance at each other, Donald and Goofy pushed the vines aside and stepped into a short tunnel with a bright light at the far end.

“Let’s check it out!”

The trio ran toward the sunny exit and found a small meadow encircled by steep cliffs. A waterfall poured down into a river from the bluff on the far side, and in front of the water was an impressively tall tower.

Meanwhile, Flynn had woken up bound to a chair, unable to move.

Before him stood a girl with blond hair brandishing a frying pan. He realized the rope tying him to the seat was actually her incredibly long hair.

“How you doing? The name’s Flynn Rider. How’s your day going? Huh?” he asked the girl with the same nonchalance he had used with Sora earlier.

The girl remained stern. “Who else knows my location, Flynn Rider?”

“All right, hang on, Blondie—”

“Rapunzel,” the girl interrupted with her real name.

“Gesundheit. Here’s the deal. I was in a situation, gallivanting through the forest when I stumbled upon a—” Just then, Flynn realized something. “Oh! Oh no, no! No, no, no! Where is my satchel?”

Rapunzel crossed her arms, frying pan still in hand, and smiled at her panicked prisoner. “I’ve hidden it. Somewhere you’ll never find it,” she declared, then jabbed the pan in Flynn’s direction. She started pacing around him, the coils of her hair constricting him more tightly with each step she took. “So what do you want with my hair? To cut it?”

“Wha—?”

“Sell it?”

“No!”

“Wait. You *don’t* want my hair?” she asked, puzzled.

“Why on earth would I want your hair? Look, I was being chased, I saw a tower, I climbed it, okay? End of story,” Flynn snapped.

A chameleon—Pascal—poked its face out of the hair of Rapunzel’s head and gave him an appraising look.

Rapunzel and Pascal then started discussing something, until—

“Okay, Flynn Rider. I’m prepared to offer you a deal.”

“A deal?”

“Look this way.” Rapunzel hopped up onto the fireplace as she spoke, accidentally unwinding her hair and spinning Flynn’s chair until he hit the ground face-first. Completely oblivious, Rapunzel pulled aside the curtain above the mantel to reveal a painting of bright lights dancing in the sky. “Do you know what these are?”

“You mean the lantern thing they do for the princess?” Flynn answered from the floor.

“Lanterns? I knew they weren’t stars,” Rapunzel said raptly, then jabbed the frying pan at Flynn again. “Well, tomorrow evening they will light the night sky with these ‘lanterns.’ You will act as my guide, take me to these lanterns, and return me home safely. Then, and only then, will I return your satchel to you. That is my deal.”

Flynn rolled his eyes up at her from the floor. “Yeah. No can do. Unfortunately...the Kingdom and I aren’t exactly ‘simpatico’ at the moment, so I won’t be taking you anywhere.”

Rapunzel reeled in her hair, pulling Flynn’s chair upright, then approached him. “Something brought you here, Flynn Rider,” she pressed. “Call it what you will: fate, destiny... So I have made the decision to trust you.”

“A horrible decision, really.”

“I am serious!” She grabbed the back of the chair, her face earnest.

“Let me get this straight. I take you to see the lanterns, bring you back home... then you’ll give me back my satchel?”

“I promise. And when I promise something, I never, ever break that promise. Ever.”

Flynn looked away from her. His satchel contained a pilfered tiara; he really, really wanted it back, but the closer he got to town, the more people would be after him, not to mention the weird little monsters from earlier.

Either way, he wasn’t going to be getting that satchel back if he couldn’t get Rapunzel to play along.

As Flynn was considering the best course of action, the trio who had helped him popped into his mind. *If I had them with me, then maybe—if worse came to worst I can let them handle things while I make a break for it.*

“All right, fine, I’ll take you. But on one condition: my three sidekicks come along.”

Rapunzel nodded happily.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy were on their way to the tower when they spotted Flynn carefully climbing down the wall, jamming arrows in between the stones for support.

Beside him, a cascade of long, golden hair billowed to the ground, followed by a girl sliding down along it.

She suddenly stopped just shy of the ground, and then lowered her feet nervously the rest of the way. She crouched down and ran her hands along the grass.

“It’s so soft!” Then she burst into a run. “I’m free... I’m really free!”

Flynn watched her twirling and dancing around the hill, as he arrived at the bottom.

“Flynn, good to see you in one piece!”

“Guys! You’re here, and just in time,” he called out to Sora and crew as they

walked over.

“Oh... Who’s she?”

“Uh, that would be Rapunzel. Something tells me this could be her first time outdoors. Give her a few minutes to get used to it.”

The girl in question was currently walking into the stream flowing from the waterfall.

It reminded Sora of the first time he left the islands. While he hadn’t been quite that excited, everything had seemed so new and different.

“I can’t believe I did this! I can’t believe I did this. I can’t believe I did *this*!” she cried as she dashed here and there about the meadow—only to suddenly stop and duck down by the edge of the water. “Mother would be so furious if she knew I disobeyed her and left the tower...”

Still, she perked back up in no time at all.

“But that’s okay—I mean, what she doesn’t know won’t kill her... Right?”

Rapunzel’s dancing quickly turned to fretting again.

“Oh my gosh. This would kill her.

“This is so fuuuuuun!

“I am a horrible daughter. I’m going back.

“I am never going back!

“I am a despicable human being.

“Best. Day. Ever!”

Sora and the others watched Rapunzel go back and forth for a while, until she at last dropped down by the base of a tree and burst into tears.

“I notice you seem a little at war with yourself here,” Flynn said to her.

“A little *more* than a little,” said Sora.

“More like a lot,” added Donald.

“Yeah...,” said Goofy.

Finally noticing the three strangers beside her, Rapunzel looked up in surprise and brandished her frying pan. “Stop right there! Who are you?”

“I told you before: my sidekicks,” Flynn answered, then gave the three of them a look. *Just play along? Please?* “May I introduce, eh...”

“Oh, uh... My name’s Sora.”

“Donald!”

“And I’m Goofy. Pleasure, ma’am.”

They quickly caught on and introduced themselves, but Rapunzel still seemed wary. Pascal poked his head out from around her shoulder.

“Sora, Donald, and...Goofy. It’s...nice to meet you, too. I’m Rapunzel.”

“Yep. My sidekicks,” Flynn reminded her.

Sora came up and tugged his sleeve. “Since when is *that*?”

“Look, she really wants to see the lantern show tomorrow night. Now, I’m a nice guy, so I’ve decided to help her. Only problem is those monsters might show up again. I can get her to the Kingdom—but you guys are clearly more cut out for combat. The hero type, know what I mean?”

Flynn was clearly buttering them up, but Donald took the bait. “We sure are!”

Goofy raised a hand. “And we’re Heartless experts.”

“Just leave it to us!” Sora added.

Flynn pointed at the trio with both hands and said, “Done.”

He then extended a hand to Rapunzel to guide her, and she began to walk along beside him.

“Rapunzel is interesting,” Donald commented as the trio started after them.

“Yeah, her heart’s pulling her all kindsa ways.”

Behind Donald and Goofy, Sora couldn’t help but think back on how it was for him when he ventured beyond his home, too. “The outside world must seem so big and scary. I know how she feels. Lucky for me you two came along at just the right time—and the rest has been unforgettable.”

I remember it like it was yesterday—leaving the Destiny Islands and arriving in Traverse Town, and then Donald and Goofy dropping on me from the sky.

“Awww...,” Donald said softly as he looked up at his friend, touched.

When Sora’s eyes met Donald’s, though, the moment was suddenly a lot more embarrassing than before. “Yep, unforgettable...just like your face!”

Once again, Donald started yelling angrily. “Oh yeah?!”

Yeah, I never had any friends before who looked as funny as you two!

Goofy stood grinning next to Donald as Rapunzel turned back toward them.

“C’mon, let’s go!” Sora called to his two friends, then started walking.

I’d never forget you, Donald and Goofy. You’re two of my best friends.

At that very moment—a woman was searching the empty tower. “Rapunzel!” she called. “Rapunzelll!!”

She was the woman who had raised Rapunzel, Mother Gothel. She paced around the chamber, but there was no sign of her daughter anywhere.

Just then, a ray of light shining through the window fell on something tucked away beneath one of the stairs.

Mother Gothel hurried over and pulled away a loose board, uncovering the satchel concealed beneath it. She pulled out the bag and examined what was inside, which turned out to be a glittering tiara. There was also a WANTED poster with Flynn’s face on it.

“Missing someone?”

Mother Gothel spun around in fright at the voice.

The intruder was a man with pink hair in a black coat. A dark mist hung in the air about him.

“Who’s there?” Mother Gothel asked, still terrified.

“She’s such a precious gift. Allow me to assist you in getting her back,” said Marluxia.

As he drew closer to Mother Gothel, her dark eyes took on an ominous hue.

Rapunzel's enthusiasm was still going strong in the forest.

"Who would've thought flowers can grow on water! The world is just full of so many things I've never seen before!"

"Guess she really hasn't ever been outside before," Goofy remarked idly as he watched Rapunzel run around, beaming like the sun.

Suddenly, something Riku had said just before they left the Destiny Islands popped into Sora's mind.

"If there are any other worlds out there, why did we end up on this one?"

"We need to go out there and find out. Just sitting here won't change a thing."

He was just like Rapunzel is now. I don't know if the path Riku chose was the right one, but I've never regretted venturing into the outside world. That's how I met all my friends, too.

Her joy was contagious—she was having a blast, blowing dandelion fuzz into the air, chasing rabbits, and splashing water to make rainbows, and Sora had a great time swinging across ravines on her hair. Rapunzel was just *fun*.

There were Heartless along the way to the Kingdom, but the group was unstoppable. Rapunzel joined in the fighting, too.

But then...

"Oh, look. What is that?" Rapunzel exclaimed as she spotted something.

An enormous flower bud was growing in their path.

"Whatever it is, it's not normal. I'll go take a look." Sora went over to inspect the bud, but he couldn't find anything suspicious about it for the time being. "We're all clear," he called over his shoulder, reassured.

It appeared to be a normal flower that was just exceptionally large. But just as everyone breathed a sigh of relief—

That giant flower bud opened up, revealing a humanoid upper body with a scythe in its hands. It floated into the air and swung the blade at Sora with dreadful speed.

"Sora!" Donald shouted.

Sora spun around at the warning and swiftly dodged the slash.

As he got back to his feet and readied his Keyblade, two more monsters appeared.

“They’re Nobodies!” Goofy shouted. No Heartless this time.

“Mother said the outside world would be full of ruffians and thugs.” Rapunzel held her frying pan at the ready.

“Those aren’t ruffians. Those are...uh, I dunno...” Donald attempted to explain what Nobodies were, but he wasn’t sure how.

“Rapunzel, Flynn, stay back!” yelled Sora.

“No. I want to help you fight,” Rapunzel replied.

But Sora still planted himself between the creatures and his friends. “I know. But I’m afraid you can’t hurt these guys with a frying pan. Trust me on this,” he told her. “Flynn, could you explain?”

“No problem. Knowing when to flee is one of my specialties,” he replied, then walked over to Rapunzel and said, “C’mon, Rapunzel, gotta go.”

“But—”

“Look, I wanna stay and slug it out, too, but my sidekicks have it covered,” Flynn explained, but Rapunzel didn’t seem convinced. She regarded him for a moment, then turned back to Sora.

“All right. Please be careful, Sora.”

Once he was sure that Rapunzel and Flynn had finally fled to safety, Sora fixed the Nobodies with a steely gaze. It was time to fight!

The scythe-wielding Nobodies looked like grim reapers—but what were Nobodies doing here at all?

Sora couldn’t shake the question from his mind as he fought them.

If these guys are here, then—

“You know who uses Nobodies...”

“The Organization!” Donald quickly finished Sora’s thought.

“Yeah. I’m surprised we haven’t seen ‘em.” Sora surveyed the area once the last Nobody had fallen. “I know you’re there! Come out, you has-beens!”

“‘Has-beens’? Now why would you say that?” asked a man in a black coat with shoulder-length pink hair, stepping out toward them.

Sora had never seen him before, but he glared at him anyway. “Because, bossing around Nobodies? That’s the old Organization. Why? Are you in the ‘real’ one, too? Good for you.”

The man snickered. “My name is Marluxia, and yes, that is correct. How interesting it is to see you again, Sora.”

“‘Again’? Do I know you?” Sora looked back at Donald and Goofy, but they only shook their heads. *Weird—it does feel like I’ve met him before. But where?*

“A shame you’ve no memory of me, because I remember you exceedingly well. Although...it’s *those* memories I’d soon erase.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” Sora said.

The creeps from Organization XIII sure like their mysterious monologues, don’t they?

“Nor should you. Nor will you ever, for that matter,” Marluxia replied, taking a few steps away. “Now if you’ll permit me, I’ve come to ask a favor.” He crossed his arms.

“Favor? You have got to be kidding me.”

“Please hear what I have to say. I’m sure you’ve noticed...” Marluxia paused and gave Sora a thoughtful look. “Well, perhaps not. But you know that maiden with you, Rapunzel, is the very light of this world. I would see you guard her from its dark horrors.”

The request caught Sora off guard. “Huh?” he replied, exasperated. “Starting with you, right?”

“All the Organization seeks is balance. You must understand, our ultimate objective is not to clash with the light. We seek to complement it. Use that Keyblade...to keep Rapunzel safe,” Marluxia told him dramatically, then vanished into a Corridor of Darkness.

“Rapunzel’s light...,” Sora muttered. Sora and his friends had once fought to protect the seven hearts of pure light—the seven princesses. Kairi was one of them. Which would mean Rapunzel was also—

“Hey. Where did they go?” Sora’s head swiveled back and forth, but there was no sign of Flynn or Rapunzel.

“I guess they musta run on ahead.”

“Then we’d better go find them.”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy resumed their trek into the forest...while Marluxia watched them go from atop a cliff.

Marluxia watched the dandelion fuzz floating against the sky.

These woods were lush in flowers, and the seeds of dandelions danced through the air. Some flowers, everyone can name—and some flowers are lost to obscurity.

The most terrifying thing of all is to forget, and to be forgotten. An errant link or two in the chain of memories can lead one astray. Sora and his friends are living proof.

Am I even remembering correctly? Have I not forgotten how I felt back then? Has my recollection not deteriorated after all this time?

The experiment in Castle Oblivion was about memory—and at the end of it, I vanished for a time.

Yet here I stand.

Who am I, and why am I here? Those answers should be clearly etched in my memory—shouldn’t they? Do I really remember? Who knows the truth?

I only recall the name of that flower, that tiny blossom—the name and nothing more.

Was I consumed by the blooming darkness and pulled down into this lightless oblivion?

Please, little flower, I only wanted you to blossom forever.

My dear little flower—Strelitzia.

After they had ventured through a gloomy marsh, Sora and the others heard Rapunzel shouting. “Wh-wh-whoa! Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Easy, boy, easy! Settle down. Whoa, whoa!”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy glanced at one another, then took off running. Rapunzel might have been under attack.

“You are such a good boy! Yes, you are.”

Once they were close enough to hear her more clearly, they found Rapunzel patting the nose of a white horse. By the look of it, the horse was angry with someone.

“Are you all tired from chasing this bad man all over the place?”

The horse neighed. Did that mean the “bad man” in question was...Flynn?

“Nobody appreciates you, do they? Do they?” Rapunzel cooed as she checked the plate on the horse’s neck. *MAXIMUS*, it said. Rapunzel grinned. “Isn’t that right, Maximus?”

Maximus didn’t seem entirely upset with having Rapunzel’s arms around him.

“Wha... You’ve got to be kidding me.” Flynn smacked his forehead, and Maximus shot him an angry glare. Apparently, Maximus had been chasing him.

“Look, today is kiiind of the biggest day of my life, and the thing is, I need you *not* to get him arrested,” said Rapunzel. Maximus shook his head fiercely and stared heatedly at Flynn. “Just for twenty-four hours, and then you can chase each other to your hearts’ content. Okay?”

Flynn gave up with a sigh and held out his hand to Maximus, but the horse simply turned his head away.

“And also, it’s my birthday. Just so you know,” Rapunzel added, her eyes full of hope. Maximus sighed, too, and moodily extended his front leg. Flynn shook it reluctantly.

“Rapunzel!”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy came running up. As soon as Rapunzel was distracted, Maximus gave Flynn a good kick, causing him to drop to the ground with a wheeze.

“You’re here. And you’re okay!”

“Yeah! You too.”

Rapunzel and Sora shared a smile. “And look! I made a friend.”

Maximus whinnied as Rapunzel gave him a pat on the nose.

“Meet Maximus. You could say Flynn introduced us. And where one goes, the other follows.” Then she gestured to Sora and his friends. “This is Sora, Goofy, and Donald. They’ve been helping me.”

Maximus seemed to have his doubts at first, but once he figured out they were Rapunzel’s friends, he tossed his head with pride and nodded approvingly.

“Come on, the Kingdom’s not far,” said Flynn as he got back to his feet, rubbing his stomach.

Beyond the forest was a lake, and beyond that was the magnificent castle town around the royal palace. Sora and the others walked along the shore until they found the stone bridge leading into town.

“Wow...!”

Rapunzel practically danced her way across the bridge with Flynn and Maximus in tow. Sora, Donald, and Goofy were not far behind.

“Rapunzel sure looks happy.”

“She does.”

Watching her running ahead with glee filled Sora and his friends with happiness, too.

As merry music drifted over the bridge toward them, the trio followed Rapunzel, Flynn, and Maximus through the gate. Everyone here seemed to be having a wonderful time; some of them were even dancing in the streets.

Goofy caught some snippets of conversation as they walked by. “They’re sendin’ the lanterns up after dark,” Goofy told Sora.

“Cool!” Sora cried excitedly. “We don’t wanna miss that!”

When they reached the plaza, there was a huge mural standing in the center, a mosaic depicting a little princess between the king and queen, with an

inscription on it.



For the lost princess.

He saw Rapunzel was dancing along with the people of the city. Her hair was braided now, too, and threaded with flowers.

“Should we join ‘em?” he called.

“Of course!” Donald bounced into the air, shaking his tail feathers.

All three of them joined hands with the townsfolk and began to dance, working their way around the circle until they finally found themselves back with Rapunzel.

Even Flynn, who had been watching from the sidelines, joined the circle eventually.

Time flew by, and before they knew it, the nighttime part of the festival was almost upon them. Once it was dark, Rapunzel would at last be able to see the wondrous lanterns in person.

The evening sun sank into the sea, and night fell upon the Kingdom.

Rapunzel and Flynn had gone out on the lake together in a small boat.

Goofy came over and sat down to watch the sky on a nearby jetty next to Sora and Donald, who were griping at each other again.

“Don’t you dare interrupt!”

“I know, I know!”

The big moment was almost here.

Out on the boat, Rapunzel, too, was gazing up into the night.

“I’ve been looking out a window for years, dreaming about what it might feel like when those lights rise in the sky. What if it’s not everything I dreamed it would be?”

“It will be,” Flynn assured her gently.

“And what if it is? What do I do then?”

“Well, that’s the good part, I guess. You get to go find a new dream.”

Rapunzel smiled, and Flynn gazed back at her intently. During the festivities, a

special bond had formed between them.

A small light—a lantern—rose up from the Kingdom, signaling its fellows to join it in the sky.

The view was like something out of a dream.

Rapunzel watched with rapt attention as the night sky filled with innumerable lights, and then she turned back to Flynn. He was holding a lantern in each hand.

Their eyes conveyed everything that needed to be said. Rapunzel took a lantern from Flynn, then released it into the air as he did the same with his. They watched their lights float away together, drifting closer and closer as they rose into the night.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy watched all the lanterns make their journey up into the sky.

Unfortunately, the quiet was shattered when a bunch of Nobodies appeared behind them.

“Could you guys have possibly picked a worse time?” Sora sighed as he got to his feet.

“I don’t think they appreciate the moment, Sora,” Goofy quipped.

“Not one bit!” added Donald.

“It’s time for these wet blankets to go!”

Sora and his comrades jumped into battle with the Nobodies.

Not long after, the lanterns vanished into the night, and Rapunzel and Flynn returned to shore in their boat.

Flynn seemed somewhat nervous. “I’m sorry. Everything is fine. There’s...just something I have to take care of,” he said, walking away from Rapunzel.

“Okay.” She nodded uneasily.

“I’ll be right back.”

Flynn vanished behind some rocks farther down the shoreline.

Pascal appeared on Rapunzel's shoulder, an uncertain look on his face.

"It's all right, Pascal," she told him, perhaps trying to convince herself as well.

A short time later, Rapunzel spotted a small boat sailing slowly along the black surface of the lake while she was waiting for Flynn to return.

She peered at it. She thought she could make out Flynn on it, but she couldn't quite tell from here. "Eugene?" she called to the boat.

There was no response.

Instead, someone else appeared in front of her.

"Who are you?" Rapunzel asked, even though her eyes were still on Flynn and the boat.

"Forget Flynn Rider," said Marluxia. "You know where you belong, and it's not with him. Now..."

Nobodies materialized as if to keep her away from Flynn. Rapunzel gulped nervously and turned to flee.

She had only run a short distance, though, when her hair snagged on a log, trapping her.

Someone suddenly called her name. "Rapunzel!"

"Mother?"

It was her mother, gripping a branch in her hands. The Nobodies had vanished.

Did Mother defeat those monsters?

Rapunzel's heart was flooded with relief.

"My precious girl."

"Mother..."

Mother Gothel ran over to Rapunzel and swept her up in her arms. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"M-Mother, how did you—"

"I was so worried about you, dear. So I followed you. And I saw them attack

you, and—" Mother Gothel pulled Rapunzel into another tight embrace. "Oh my. Let's go. Let's go before they come to."

Still in her mother's arms, Rapunzel turned to look at the small boat making its way across the lake.

It's just like Mother always said: The outside world is a terrible place. I was right to be afraid.

Keeping close to her mother, Rapunzel began to walk away.

"Hey, isn't that Rapunzel?"

Once their battle with the Nobodies was over, Sora, Donald, and Goofy spotted Rapunzel being led away by a woman. There was no mistaking that gleaming golden braid, but at this distance, they couldn't identify the woman she was with.

"Wait! Rapunz—" Sora shouted, but he cut off before Rapunzel could hear him as Marluxia emerged from the darkness.

"Show some decorum."

Sora and crew got their weapons ready for action.

"You again!" Donald shouted angrily.

"The girl has found her dear mother," Marluxia admonished them. "You should let them be."

"And why is that?" Sora couldn't hide his irritation.

"Because Rapunzel is far too important. Atop her tower, she must remain out of sight, and live out her days with Mother Gothel."

"And never see anyone else?"

Goofy was confused, but Sora quickly caught on to the implications. "But that's like...locking her in prison!"

Now that she'd experienced the wonders of the world outside, Rapunzel's life in the tower would be so much harder.

"That is *exactly* what it's like. Rapunzel's hair holds the powerful magic of healing. And yes, Mother Gothel wants it for herself. As do others. And, if

Mother Gothel's actions will protect Rapunzel, preserve her...then she is doing the Organization a favor," Marluxia admitted shamelessly.

Sora was stunned by how unbelievably selfish Marluxia's logic was. "What favor?" he asked curtly.

"Let's say she's keeping Rapunzel on the shelf for us. An extra pawn in case you fail to find the remaining guardians of light, and we have occasion to call on other hearts of light instead. A New Seven Hearts to fill out the ranks."

Sora hadn't heard anything about this. "'New Seven Hearts'?" he repeated softly. That meant Organization XIII needed the new lights of the princesses as backup.

There were seven guardians of light and seven new hearts.

Marluxia had also mentioned failing to find the other guardians—he must be referring to Aqua and the others.

"Yes. Seven who inherited the princesses' light after their role was fulfilled."

"So, you don't care about her. You guys just want Rapunzel for your own purposes!" Sora glared at Marluxia and jabbed his Keyblade at him. "Well, you're done here!"

"Hmph. I just knew you would go and make a scene. Very well, then it's lights out for you."

With a wave of his hand, Marluxia sent a mist swirling toward Sora and around his face.

Almost instantly, Sora felt his head growing heavy.

Huh...? Is this...?

A dream from which there was no awakening. Sora's consciousness was slipping away.

"Sora!"

He could hear Donald and Goofy calling out to him from far, far away.

I can't remember when, but...I don't think this is the first time I've fallen asleep like this. When—when was that again? I can't... I'm just too tired...

“You always were a sound sleeper.”

Those were the final words Sora heard.

Meanwhile, Rapunzel was lying in bed after returning to the tower with Mother Gothel.

Everything that happened—it all seemed like a dream. Maybe it really was a dream. The outside world was a nightmare, just like she said.

...Or was it? Was it really so full of terrible things?

Rapunzel clutched a small flag that she had gotten at the festival in her hand. It was embroidered with the sun-shaped crest of the royal family—exactly the same as the symbol on the ceiling, she realized.

Yes... Yes, I remember now. That tiara—it belonged to me. I know the truth now.

I—am the lost princess.

Rapunzel got out of bed and began to pace around aimlessly.

“I...

Mother Gothel was with her, watching her. “Please speak up, Rapunzel,” she said. “You know I hate the mumbling.”

“I am the lost princess. Aren’t I?”

Mother Gothel’s eyes went wide.

“Did I mumble, Mother? Or should I even call you that?”

“Oh, Rapunzel. Do you even hear yourself? Why would you ask such a ridiculous question?” Mother Gothel said soothingly as she reached out to Rapunzel, but Rapunzel swatted her hand away.

“It was you! It was *all* you!”

“Everything I did was to protect you.”

Rapunzel shoved away Mother Gothel and her attempt at an embrace, then dashed down the stairs.

“Rapunzel...”

“I spent my entire life hiding from people who would use me for my power... when I should have been hiding from *you*!” She hurried over to one of the tower windows.

“Where will you go? He won’t be there for you,” Mother Gothel declared coldly.

“What did you do to him?”

“That criminal’s to be hanged for his crimes.”

“No...”

“Now, now, it’s all right. Listen to me. All of this is as it should be.” Mother Gothel drew closer, pressing Rapunzel up against the window seat, then reached out to stroke her hair.

Rapunzel caught hold of her wrist before Mother Gothel could touch her. “No! You were wrong about the world. And you were wrong about me. And I will *never* let you use my hair again!”

Mother Gothel shook off Rapunzel’s grip.

“You want me to be the bad guy? Fine. Now I’m the bad guy.”

A dark aura appeared around Mother Gothel, and her eyes took on a crimson glow.

I’m asleep... Where am I? What—what am I doing?

“Sora!”

It was the morning after the festival, and the pale light of dawn fell across Sora as he slept. Donald and Goofy were shouting at him desperately, but he wouldn’t wake up.

Suddenly a young man riding a white horse came galloping by—Flynn and Maximus, as it turned out. Flynn had escaped his perilous situation thanks to the help of his friends, and now the two of them were on their way to rescue Rapunzel.

“Whoa, Max! Whoa, boy.”

Maximus screeched to a halt, and Donald and Goofy looked up, clearly upset.

“Oh!”

“Flynn!”

The young man peered at Sora from atop Maximus. “Is Sora okay?”

“We don’t know. We keep callin’ his name and shakin’ him, but he won’t open his eyes.”

Flynn sighed as Goofy filled him in on their dilemma.

“Sora!”

“Wake up!”

No matter how many times his friends shouted at him, Sora never stirred.

“Hmm... Unresponsive sidekick... Wait a minute. I know how to fix this!”

Flynn thought for a moment, his arms crossed, then turned his eyes toward the horse. “Max, give him a wash!”

Maximus licked Sora’s face.

“U-unh...” Sora’s eyes slowly opened.

“Well, that did the trick. Nice work, Max!”

The horse beamed proudly at the praise.

Since when were those two friends? Donald and Goofy watched the interaction, puzzled.

“Huh? How did I end up...,” Sora wondered as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and got to his feet.

Umm...

Then it came back to him.

“Oh no! Flynn, Rapunzel’s being held prisoner!”

“That’s right. In her mother’s tower. This calls for a rescue.” He paused and looked Sora in the eyes. “Are you with me?”

Flynn held out his hand. Sora took it, and Flynn pulled his friend up behind him atop Maximus.

“Yeah.”

Donald and Goofy jumped astride as well, with Donald on Sora’s shoulders and Goofy sitting at the very back. Naturally, the weight of the entire crew was almost too much for Maximus’s legs as he struggled to stay upright. But with a low, determined whinny and mighty effort, the horse managed to pull himself together and neighed again.

“Let’s go, Max!”

Maximus set off at full gallop for the tower where Rapunzel was trapped.

The dense trees and flower fields of the forest sped by; they were traveling as fast as Maximus could go, until Nobodies appeared to bar their way. They looked to be pretty tough customers.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy leaped down from Maximus, their weapons ready for combat.

“We’ll take it from here, Flynn. Go help Rapunzel.”

“Thanks!” replied Flynn, skillfully weaving his way through the enemies with Maximus.

“Okay, it’s party time!”

Sora charged into the pack of Nobodies.

Flynn made his way up the tower as quickly as he could.

I hope she’s okay. Well, Mother Gothel wants Rapunzel for her power, so she wouldn’t do anything to hurt her. But as long as she’s here, Rapunzel will never be free.

Once he had scaled the wall of the tower, Flynn poked his head in the window.

“Rapunzel! I thought I’d never see you again.” Then, he realized she was bound with chains, her mouth covered by a cloth, and he hurried into the tower to free her.

Rapunzel shrieked a warning around the gag as Mother Gothel crept up behind him to strike. Just as he realized what was happening, Flynn felt

something like fire in his stomach. Rapunzel's screams were still muffled.

Flynn fell to the floor and groaned at the dizzying pain, but he didn't take his eyes off Rapunzel.

"Rapunzel, really! Enough already! Stop fighting me!"

Mother Gothel dragged the girl along by her chains, but Rapunzel was putting up a fierce struggle. The cloth fell from her mouth.

"No! I won't stop! For every minute of the rest of my life, I will fight!"

Mother Gothel looked down at her fearfully.

"I will never stop trying to get away from you!" Rapunzel told her vehemently, then looked back for a moment at Flynn. Her rebellion turned to supplication. "But...if you let me save him, I will go with you."

"No! No, Rapunzel...," Flynn pleaded, his voice full of pain.

But Rapunzel wasn't finished. "I'll never run... I'll never try to escape. Just let me heal him...and you and I will be together—forever, just like you want. Everything will be the way it was. I promise. Just like you want. Just...let me heal him."

Mother Gothel glowered coldly at Flynn, then swiftly moved over to him and bound his arms with chains.

"In case you get any ideas about following us," she hissed once she was sure he couldn't move.

"Eu...Eugene!" Rapunzel ran over to Flynn. "Everything is going to be okay."

"No...Rapunzel..." *Saving me means she loses her freedom forever.*

"I promise. You have to trust me."

"No! I can't let you do this." *I want you to be happy, even if it costs me my life.*

But Rapunzel just softly rested her hand on his cheek. "And I can't let you die."

"But if you do this...but if you do this, *you* will die," Flynn gasped out. The pain was starting to cloud his mind.

“Hey. It’s gonna be all right,” she said gently.

Flynn made one last attempt to save her. “Rapunzel...wait,” he murmured. She paused, and he reached out to hug her close—and then cut her hair with a shard of glass he had kept hidden in his hand.

“Eugene, what—?!” Rapunzel’s blond locks darkened before their eyes.

“No!” screeched Mother Gothel, gathering the fallen hair to her. Its golden light was already gone. “Oh, no. No...”

In a heartbeat, Mother Gothel’s body began aging, her raven hair turning white, her firm skin growing wrinkled, and her back hunching over.

“What have you done?” Mother Gothel pulled the hood of her robe over her head to conceal her decrepit form. “What have you done?!” Even her voice croaked like an old woman’s.

She thrashed about, screaming like a madwoman, and just as she drew near the window...

Pascal took the remnants of Rapunzel’s long hair on the floor in his mouth and gave them a hard tug.

The hair tangled Mother Gothel’s feet, throwing her off-balance and sending her staggering right into the window—and out of it, plunging to the earth below.

Sora’s eyes went to the top of the tower as he heard the scream. Something was falling—but all he could see was a robe.

What had become of the old woman, Mother Gothel?

Marluxia was watching from a distance. “Fallen to darkness...,” he murmured to himself. “We can’t allow her near our pure light now. Her presence would only cast a pall over it.”

The Organization member gave a dismissive wave of his hand, sending flowers dancing around Mother Gothel’s robe. Darkness enveloped it, transforming it into a gigantic Heartless that resembled a tree—Grim Guardianess.

Sora summoned his Keyblade as he stared at the four-armed monstrosity that looked like something straight out of the heart of a cursed forest.

The vile creature rushed toward him with frightening speed and loomed over him, bringing its arms crashing down. Sora sprang out of the way, while Donald used the opening to fire off a quick spell.

Grim Guardianess took the hit, then rolled her big eyes over angrily toward Donald and slammed her leafy, dark green head into the ground, releasing a shower of pollen over Sora and his friends.

“Quachoo!” Donald sneezed loudly. Sora and Goofy couldn’t stop sneezing, either.

“What is this stuff...? Achoo!”

It was all Sora and his comrades could do to avoid the Heartless’s attacks, since they were too busy sneezing to launch any of their own.

Meanwhile, Grim Guardianess latched on to the tower and started shedding branches to form a cage around the trio. When she had them trapped, she started raining down bombs shaped like nuts.

“Oh, come on! Achoo!”

Sora managed to break down the cage using his Keyblade in between sneezes, while Goofy knocked away the bombs with his shield. Donald took off running, with Sora and Goofy close behind.

It was time to turn this around.

Donald and Sora dashed up the tower and teamed up to unleash a massive flaming barrage that eventually set her ablaze. Grim Guardianess toppled from her perch, and Sora jumped after her. He struck at her with his Keyblade while Donald kept up the heat with magic.

“Let’s end this!”

When Sora landed the final blow, Grim Guardianess fell still and vanished in a burst of light.

“What about Rapunzel?!”

“Let’s hurry!”

Sora and his friends began climbing to the top of the tower.

“Don’t go. Stay with me, Eugene.”

Rapunzel cradled him in her arms; he was limp and unconscious. *I could have healed him right now, but...my hair doesn’t have its power anymore.*

Rapunzel touched Flynn’s hand to her hair and began to sing. The song was magic; normally, her hair would gleam and glow to heal anything, even the ravages of old age.

Now, the magic of her hair was gone.

“Rapunzel. Hey. Rapunzel,” Flynn murmured weakly.

“What?”

“Rapunzel... You were my new dream.” With that final confession, his eyes closed.

“And you were mine.”

Rapunzel could feel the strength leaving his body. She pressed her forehead to his and fought back her tears, still singing. A few drops still fell onto his face—and turned to light.

Then the same golden gleam that had once belonged to her hair shone from his wound.

“Rapunzel...” Flynn’s eyes opened slightly.

“Eugene!”

“Did I ever tell you...I’ve got a thing for brunettes?”

Rapunzel broke out into a smile and hugged him tight.

Flynn returned the embrace.

Meanwhile, Sora, Donald, and Goofy, who had been watching quietly from the window, put their arms around one another’s shoulders and grinned.

Down in the meadow, the brilliant light of the sun cast the tower’s dark shadow across the grass.

Having bid the tower farewell, Rapunzel, Flynn, and Maximus stood facing Sora and his friends in one of the brighter spots.

“Wow, Rapunzel! You’re finally gonna get to see your real home.”

“I know! I mean...I can’t believe it. I can finally be with my real family! I couldn’t have done it without your help,” she said, still unable to hide her surprise at how it had all turned out.

“You’re welcome,” replied Donald, and then Flynn nodded quietly.

“Well, from where I’m standing, the Kingdom couldn’t ask for a better princess,” said Flynn. “And I couldn’t have asked for better sidekicks. Thanks.”

Rapunzel drew close to him, then looked over at the three heroes. “Yes, thank you so much.”

“Happily ever after,” Donald said with a touch of mirth.

“Now, Flynn, you and Maximus play nice,” Goofy added. Flynn and the horse shared a look, until Rapunzel took Flynn’s hand.

Seeing them so happy together, Sora was content. “You’re gonna be great.”

“Huh?” they both asked in unison.

“We haven’t seen the guy controlling the monsters in a while, so that’s one less worry,” explained Sora.

Goofy added, “But there’s still a chance that he might be around here somewhere.”

“Well, if he comes back and tries to bother Rapunzel again, then Flynn will keep her safe. And we three won’t be far behind.”

“Yeah, I won’t let her out of my sight,” Flynn declared firmly, while Rapunzel blushed with embarrassment.

“Oh... Eugene.”

“‘Eugene’?”

It was the first time Sora had heard that name.

“Oh! That’s my real name. Eugene Fitzherbert. That’s right. I never told you guys,” said Flynn—well, Eugene now.

“That’s different,” Donald commented, while Goofy added:

“I think it’s a great name!”

“Me, too,” said Sora. “Nice to re-meet you, Eugene.”

“Hey! I thought I was the only one you were going to tell.”

Rapunzel seemed a bit disappointed, so Eugene pulled her close and whispered, “Don’t worry. I’ve saved plenty of Fitzherbert-y secrets just for you.”

“Really?”

Before they could get *too* lost in each other’s eyes, Sora jabbed a finger at them. “Hey! What are you two lovebirds talking about?” he teased.

“Nothing!”

“Nothing.”

Eugene and Rapunzel laughed.

Donald and Goofy seemed to have gotten the wrong idea, too. “Hey, you can tell us!” Donald griped.

“Yeah, it’s not nice to keep secrets.”

“This one is none of your business.”

“Maximus, get him!” Sora hollered.

The horse turned toward Eugene in a warning. While the two of them squared off, Pascal hopped onto Eugene’s shoulder and shot his tongue into his ear.

“Ack! You have got to be kidding me!”

Everyone laughed as Eugene clapped a hand over his ear.

Rapunzel will be safe in this world, I know it.

There in that meadow, they were happy.

Right around then, Maleficent and Pete were elsewhere in that very same world.

“Another world where we got doodly-squat.”

“Hmph,” Maleficent snorted.

“You sure this box thingy’s even real?”

“Yes,” the witch replied confidently, then turned away from Pete.

“Yeah, and just how do you know that?”

“It is etched.”

“It’s what?”

Maleficent opened a Corridor of Darkness before her confused cohort. “Come with me.”

“Where to? Those bozos ain’t gonna help us. Sora’s sure not lookin’ for the box.”

“Who said anything about following them?”

The witch stepped into the portal, and with no other choice, Pete trailed after her.



Chapter 7

MONSTROPOLIS

Chapter 7

Monstropolis

IN THE NEXT WORLD, SORA, DONALD, AND GOOFY found themselves right in front of the entrance to a huge factory—or a huge *something*, anyway. It was nighttime.

The town around them was exceedingly mundane, and the houses in the distance all seemed like the type you might find anywhere. Some lights were on here and there, but no one was nearby.

When they turned toward the front of the enormous building, the first thing that caught their attention was the big, blue *M* with a symbol that resembled an eye in the middle.

Several chimneys rose from the factorylike building. Sora automatically began walking forward, then looked back at Donald and Goofy to say something.

“Wha...?”

“Wak!”

“A-hyuck!”

The trio cried out practically simultaneously as they spotted one another. They had drawn their weapons without realizing it, too.

“D-Donald... Goofy... Why do you guys look like monsters?” Sora shouted, but they weren’t the only ones. His own hair had turned red, and his body was covered with fur with brown stripes. He also had the tail of a dinosaur, pointy ears, and a catlike curve to his mouth.

“You do, too!” shot back Donald, who was now entirely blue with distinctly monstrous hands and feet. He had bat wings now and, most noticeably, only a single eye.

“Well, ya both scared me.”



Goofy was all green. His eyes were different sizes and different colors, one red, and the other blue. His nose was sharp and pointed.

“Seriously? Is *this* how we blend in here?” Sora inspected his transformed hands, then checked over the rest of his body. No two ways about it, he was now quite the monster.

Maybe I’m in no position to talk, but Donald and Goofy look freaky. If I woke up in the middle of the night and saw them by my bed, I’d be scared silly.

“Could you guys take a few steps back? You’re givin’ me the heebie-jeebies.”

“You take a step back!” Donald leaped up angrily.

They’re just so creepy! Not sure what I look like yet, but if that’s what the magic did to them, I must be terrifying.

“Come on, I think our new look could turn out to be lots of fun!” Goofy said. He always took everything in stride.

Yeah, Donald is kinda funny...I guess? Nope. Still creepy.

“Wonder what kind of weirdos live here...,” Sora mumbled to himself as he looked around. He couldn’t see any strange creatures nearby, but if these new forms were supposed to help them blend in, that might mean the place was full of monsters.

We’ve transformed into all kinds of things before now, but monsters is a first. Oh, wait—we did get some creepy getups when we went to Halloween Town.

Sora sighed and then started toward the factory, resigned to his fate.

“Who’d’a thunk he’d get so creeped out?” Donald whispered to Goofy, and the two of them shared a laugh.

Oblivious, Sora read the words written on the building. “It says ‘We scare because we care’?”

“That’s odd,” said Donald, tilting his head to one side. If they were scaring people, then...

“Doesn’t sound very caring,” commented Goofy. He was right; it was hard to imagine good guys would be going around upsetting people.

“If they look like us, then they could be trouble. I think we’d better investigate,” Sora suggested, then opened the doors of the building. They walked into a hall and immediately spotted a big horned monster with blue fur and a small girl in its clutches.

“Oh no!” he yelped, and the monster turned around.

“Hmm? I wonder who those guys are?”

“What?! Careful, Sulley. If they see the K-I-D...,” said a second monster in a panicked whisper. This one was green and round like a ball, with two horns and a single eye.

The blue creature didn’t look too worried. “It’s fine. We got nothing to hide.”

“But you’re the CEO! You set the example,” the one-eyed monster said quickly before running over to Sora and his friends. “Guys! Guys, it’s not what it looks like. Okay, listen. That kid over there just popped out of nowhere! We gotta call the CDA. Uh... It’s a...uh... Oh yeah, a Code eight-three-five!” he babbled.

Sora held out his Keyblade. “Are you trying to scare that little girl?”

“Yes! I mean, no, no, no! We’re done with scare power. Nobody’s gettin’ scared.”

“Mike, take it easy,” the blue monster said to his one-eyed friend.

Goofy turned to Sora. “You should, too, Sora. Ya see? She’s happy!”

Now that he mentioned it, the girl was laughing as the blue monster patted her on the head. Sora put away his Keyblade and walked over to her, then knelt down to eye level to introduce himself.

“Hello. My name is Sora.”

“Boo,” said the girl.

“Oh, is that your name? Nice to meet you, Boo.”

Boo giggled happily.

“Hold on!” Mike cried in surprise. “You guys really aren’t afraid of humans?”

Boo pointed at Donald. “Mike Wazowski!”

Donald leaped into the air in surprise. “Wak?”

“Come on, Boo! *I’m* Mike Wazowski.”

Mike tried to correct her, but Boo turned back to Donald and said it again. “Mike Wazowski.”

The blue monster chuckled. “Well, you can see the resemblance. That googly bear eye.”

“What’s going on? I’m Donald Duck!” Donald rushed over to Boo and complained, but she just pointed again.

“Mike Wazowski!” she yelled before starting to chase him.

Well, Donald and Mike *did* both have only one eye.

Sora’s other friend introduced himself as he normally would. “A-hyuck! I’m Goofy.”

The blue monster smiled. “Well, my name’s Sulley,” he replied, “and this is—”

“Oh, we know. Mike Wazowski, right?” Sora interrupted.

Boo bounded up alongside Sora and giggled innocently, and the five monsters couldn’t help but join in—until she spotted something and went to hide behind Sulley.

“What’s the matter, Boo?”

She yelped fearfully.

Sora turned around to see what could be the cause, only to find—

“Heartless!” he shouted as he got his Keyblade ready, but then he noticed something different about them.

The darkness forming these creatures was a sort of bluish-black color, and the emblem etched on their bodies was unlike the usual one.

These aren’t Heartless, are they...?

“No... That’s not the Heartless’s emblem!” Sora exclaimed.

“Then, what?” asked Donald.

Goofy cocked his head to one side. “And how come I feel like I mighta seen

'em before?"

Sora made up his mind to fight them anyway. "Well, they aren't friendly." They weren't Heartless or Nobodies, but they were still enemies.

Behind Sora and his friends as they drew their weapons, Sulley scooped up Boo in his arms and hid her behind a reception counter in the back of the hall.

"Stay here. Kitty will be back."

"Those guys are right, Sulley. This has got 'bad news' written all over it," Mike grumbled.

"Yeah, we gotta keep Boo safe."

"I'm on it," Mike said, agreeing with his friend. They were going to fight, too.

Sora charged. "Here goes nothing!"

Meanwhile, Sulley crept up on the enemy from behind and let out a sudden roar. He had seemed so kindly before, but the creature shrank back in terror from his bared teeth.

While they were cowering, Sora closed in with his Keyblade. As for Mike, he darted around the enemy until they started trying to chase him down. Donald used this opening to blast them with magic.

Sora turned his attention to the largest of the group, a creature shaped like a frog.

Once the last of their opponents had fallen, Sulley and Mike gave each other a high five.

"Nice, Sulley. Even with those extra pounds you put on."

"Heh, still runnin' circles around you, butterball."

The two were clearly old friends as they needled each other.

Boo had crawled up onto the counter. "Kitty!" she called.

Once Sulley returned with Boo in his arms, Mike asked Sora, "So, any idea who those guys were?"

"Well...they couldn't have been Heartless..."

As Sora thought the answer over, Goofy tilted his head to one side. “Hmm... It’s on the tip of my tongue,” he mused. “I remember the king told us somethin’ about...negative emotions.”

The name came to Donald first. “Unversed?”

“Oh yeah! Them!” Goofy nodded.

Sora had never heard the name before.

“Uh-huh. A while back, the king fought a whole bunch of battles against ’em with the three missing Keyblade wielders,” Goofy explained to Sora.

Then those three missing Keyblade wielders must be—

“The same three that we’re looking for? Aqua, Terra, and Ventus?”

“Uh-huh. We need more dependable help than you!” Donald jeered.

“Hey!” Sora snapped.

“Still, how come they’re showin’ up now? I thought those monsters were— Oh.” Goofy scratched his head as he lapsed back into thought.

He had a point. Why were monsters from way back then appearing here? Why now?

Sulley and Mike shared a look at the word *monsters*. They had been listening to the conversation, but they had no idea what was going on.

Donald turned to them. “Is it because they use scream power?” he asked accusingly.

“Hey, I told you—we’re through using that!” Mike retorted.

“Besides,” Sulley said lightly, “we have no idea who or what you’re talking about...”

“Oh, you’d really like the king—”

Donald and Goofy hurriedly covered Sora’s mouth before he could explain.

“Order!”

Once he was free to speak again, Sora uneasily tried to give their new friends the gist. “Umm...basically...we’ve come from far away to get rid of those

creatures causing trouble. We're like...exterminators?"

Donald and Goofy nodded in agreement beside him.

"Just *how* far away?" Mike asked.

"As far as you can imagine," said Goofy in reply.

Mike scratched his head uncertainly. "Hmm... Okay, okay, let's just say we buy all that. Are those creeps dangerous?" he asked.

"Extremely!" Donald answered with a little hop.

Sulley and Boo glanced at each other. "They sure gave Boo a scare."

The little girl bobbed her head in agreement.

"Sulley, I know you've missed her, but it's time to postpone our playdate," Mike said disappointedly, turning to his friend.

"You're right, Mikey. Let's get our girl home."

The two of them nodded.

"What are you planning to do?"

"It's kind of a long story...but Boo's from another world, and we gotta send her back there...to keep her safe."

Mike turned to Boo once he finished answering Sora's question.

The situation sounds kinda complicated...but if the Unversed are going to be showing up like this, it's just too dangerous—

"Okay, then. We're gonna help you. Well, the Unversed might try to cause more trouble, so we wanna come along."

"Great! We could use a couple of exterminators around here!" Mike nodded joyfully.

"Yeah, thanks." Sulley sounded very grateful.

With that out of the way, the two of them began walking farther into the building.

"You've always gotta help," Donald quacked, slightly disgruntled.

“Hey, they need us,” Sora said with his usual grin. “Besides, we need to figure out how all those Unversed got here. C’mon, let’s get moving.” With that, they all started walking together.

They passed through the hall and entered a well-lit corridor wide enough for all five of them to walk abreast. At the end of the hallway, they turned left into an open room—an odd chamber with countless doors, each marked with unfamiliar symbols.

What was this room used for? Sora decided to ask Sulley. “What’s this place?”

“The laugh floor—although it used to be called the scream floor.”

“What do you mean?” Goofy asked.

As Mike walked out ahead of them, singing something to himself, Sulley carried a giggling Boo in his arm and explained. “So, Monsters, Incorporated, used to rely on scream power from human kids for energy, but now we collect their laughter instead. It turns out laughter’s ten times more powerful.” Apparently, each of these many doors was connected to the room of a human child. The blue monster paused and set Boo down on the floor so she could chase after Mike, then started walking forward again. “And we’d never have figured it out without Boo.”

“Our ship’s powered by laughter, too!” Goofy replied. “Guess we’ve got that in common.”

“Sora’s a laughter machine!” Donald added.

Sora was getting embarrassed. “Come on, I am not.” Still, he had to admit that as long as they were able to keep laughing, things *did* have a way of working out. And laughter was definitely better than screams.

Suddenly, Boo came to a frightened halt.

There were Unversed all over the wide floor, opening doors and darting through them. Beyond the door, they could hear the screams of children.

“Unversed are back!”

Sora rushed out with his Keyblade. After a shriek came from behind a door, a big crane would lift the door and carry it off on rails.

“Look! There’s Boo’s door!”

Mike was pointing at a white door with little pink flowers—it was already being transported away.

Sulley ran after the door in a panic, but Mike stopped him. “Go get Boo!” Now that his thoughts were back in order, the big blue monster picked up the girl and placed her safely behind some machinery.

“Kitty!”

“We’ll have to play another time, Boo. You stay here.”

The girl nodded meekly. She really seemed to trust him; it warmed Sora’s heart to watch them.

“Ready to clean house?”

Sulley and Mike joined Sora’s team in facing down the Unversed. These guys were a little quicker than the Heartless, but Mike was just as fast on his feet. Sulley’s frightening roars could freeze them entirely, which was extra helpful.

“Let’s keep it up!” Sora sent the Unversed scattering.

Still, I wonder why these creeps are showing up here. Maybe this world is connected to the three missing Keyblade wielders somehow?

As soon as the Unversed had been dealt with, Mike swiped cardkeys through a few machines next to a door.

Three fresh doors came down and latched into place next to the devices.

“Ride’s here! Grab on to the door when you’re ready.”

“Got it.”

Sora climbed onto one of the doors. Donald and Goofy got on another, and then Boo, Sulley, and Mike hopped aboard the last.

The doors began rising toward the rails.

“Whoa!” Sora clung tight to his door.

A few seconds later, a section of the supposedly empty room warped and wavered suspiciously.

“Oh, I just got a great idea,” the distortion whispered, then vanished completely.

The doors made their way into a warehouse where thousands of others were kept in storage. Sora and crew had no choice but to follow the rails, which were taking them straight toward another pack of Unversed.

“Leave the bad guys to us! You keep Boo safe!” Sora called toward Sulley and Mike, then climbed up to stand on his door. His footing was a bit wobbly, but he had to work with what he had. He fired off shots from his Keyblade and sent the creatures tumbling to the warehouse floor.

“Watch out!”

At Sulley’s warning, Sora hid behind the door to protect himself from an attack.

Man, just how many of these doors are there? We gotta find the one that leads to Boo’s world.

When they reached the end of the line, they hopped down onto a platform.

Before them was a single door, a white one with pink flowers on it.

“There it is!”

Mike ran straight up to the door and opened it. Boo’s room was just on the other side, and there she would be safe.

But when they stepped through...

“Wait! How’d we take a wrong turn?”

Mike looked at their surroundings. They weren’t in Boo’s room, but another part of the plant.

Just then, a strange voice came from near the door they had just passed through.

“Who cares? I just made a few adjustments to it.” There was no one there, but they could hear a voice. It was unfamiliar...and quite unsettling. Soon, its owner revealed himself; apparently, he had camouflage abilities. “All that matters...is that it’s the last turn you losers are ever gonna take.”

“Randall?!” Sulley cried.

Randall resembled an eight-legged chameleon, except his scales were naturally purple.

“Who’s he?” Sora asked.

Sulley scowled at Randall as he answered. “A creep we banished for trying to collect screams by force. He used to be Boo’s scarer.”

“How did you even get back here?” Mike asked the unwelcome monster. “The door we sent you through is sawdust!”

“Yeah, and I almost got turned into somebody’s wallet. Lucky for me, a real nice guy came along and fixed the door. So here I am. And starting today, I’m numero uno! Top of the leaderboard, baby!” Randall snickered as he whipped his long tail.

Mike wasn’t about to agree. “Ha! You, a top laugh collector? In your dreams, Randall. My laugh totals are off the charts.”

“Who said anything about collecting laughs?” Randall spat back.

Sulley and Mike shared a look.

This guy was a *serious* creep.

“I’m after negative emotions. And my new friends have invaded the factory to get ’em for me,” the purple monster said, sinister as ever.

Donald and Goofy were unnerved by his words, too. “He’s gotta know.”

“Yeah, Organization XIII must be helpin’ him.”

Randall ignored them and continued, slithering his way around Sora and crew. “Laughter’s just not sustainable. Once junior chorts his last chortle, you’ve gotta start over. But negative energy? Especially sadness? Give ’em something that really breaks their little hearts, and they’ll stay sad forever. We’ll never have to worry about energy again.”

“We’re not gonna let you hurt anyone like that!” Sora summoned his Keyblade and took a step closer. Randall was definitely not to be taken lightly. “Not you *or* your little Unversed helpers!”

“Just try and stop me,” Randall hissed, dripping with hatred. “You’ll see soon enough. I am gonna be a legend around this place. Now, consider *your* careers officially over. And that goes for the rest of you, too.” With that, he faded out of view.

“Hey!”

Sora tried to chase him, but the monster had vanished so thoroughly it was impossible to tell where he was.

“We’re in control of the factory now.” Randall was still invisible, but his voice was loud and clear. “And I suggested a few improvements—some real doozies I just know you’re gonna love. In fact, you’re not getting out of here alive.”

Mike looked up at Sulley with a grim expression. “That weasel means business! He’ll never quit.”

“We have to get Boo to safety first. Then we can take care of Randall. Time to find a way out!”

Sulley was on guard, too.

These two seem to know this guy pretty well. Sounds like we’re in for some real trouble. Sora decided to be ready for anything. Donald and Goofy nodded, too.

“Okay! Which way? Here?”

Donald walked down the hall toward some stairs.

“I got it now! We’re in the basement!” Mike dashed up the steps once he realized it. Everyone else followed his lead and found a conveyor belt. It was running right to left—the opposite of the way they were going. To make matters worse, the robotic arms on either side were firing red lasers at Sora and his friends.

“Hey! What’s with the machines? They’ve gone totally bonkers! There’s no way we can take Boo through here safely.” Mike ran his hands down his face despairingly.

Sulley picked Boo up out of harm’s way. “This must be what Randall meant by ‘improvements,’” he said, looking at the laser machines.

But there was no reason to worry. “Nothin’ we can’t handle! We just have to break them, right?” Sora assured them with a grin, summoning his Keyblade.

“Yeah! We’ll take care of this!”

Donald immediately launched a spell toward one of the arms, which fell still with a burst of sparks.

“Now’s our chance!” Sora cried, and everyone rushed forward.

Still, running against a conveyer belt proved quite the challenge. They couldn’t even pause for breath, but eventually, they reached another set of stairs.

Ahead, they could see a big shutter.

They all took a moment to catch their breath, and Sulley especially appeared relieved. “Once we get through here, we’re clear,” he said, and Boo scampered on ahead while he hurried after her.

Behind them, Mike walked over to a device along the wall of the room. “Yup! This is the central control unit for the whole factory! Now, whaddaya say we get outta here?”

Sora and Donald ran past Mike toward the console.

“Let me.”

“I’ll do it!”

The two started pressing buttons here and there at random, but nothing happened.

“Hey, hey! Show a little finesse!” Mike hurriedly pushed Sora out of the way and began working the control unit, but it didn’t respond to him, either.

“Rats! Randall must have messed this up. Nothin’ works!” He sighed, frustrated.

“We can’t get out?” Donald asked.

“Maybe it would be faster to just break it,” Goofy suggested.

It was hardly a plan, but Sora summoned his Keyblade anyway. “That’s brilliant!”

“Hang on!” Sulley shouted, stopping Sora before he could damage the console beyond repair. “Think I’ve got a better idea. If we can just short it out, the lock will disengage. And, lucky for us, Boo is a walking energy generator.” He set Boo atop his head. The girl immediately started giggling with childlike glee.

The control unit was soon crackling with electricity.

“You’re our MVP, Boo!” Mike nodded.

Sulley began to run around with Boo still on his head, while the rest of the group chased him. As she started laughing in earnest, Mike took a spill, and Sora tripped over him and accidentally kicked him across the floor like a ball. Mike tried to stop by sticking out his legs, but then Sora’s Keyblade came crashing down on his head. His eye spun, dazed and dizzy, and Boo howled.

But then Boo fell silent as she noticed something: Unversed had appeared in her line of sight. Her expression quickly turned to terror.

“You guys are a real pain!”

The whole group glared at the party crashers spoiling the fun.

Sulley roared, and the Unversed froze.

“Here goes!” Sora shouted as he grabbed on to Mike’s head and sent him rolling toward the enemies.

“Ee-hee!” Boo giggled.

“I’m gettin’ dizzy here!” Mike cried as he rolled along like a bowling ball and crashed into the Unversed. Once the creatures were gone, Boo laughed again.

“Oh man,” Mike groaned as he clambered to his feet unsteadily.

“Hey, at least the Unversed are gone! And Boo’s having fun again!” Sora reminded him proudly.

Everyone cracked up—Boo most of all. Her laughter sent sparks dancing across the control unit, and yet— “It’s no use. We need a bigger burst of laughter,” said Mike.

“Would you care to do the honors?” Sully urged.

“I’d love to.” Mike stepped in front of Boo, grinning broadly, and placed his

hands flat on both sides of his face. Each time he hit his face with a palm, his eye would roll in the opposite direction. He kept going back and forth, getting faster each time, until— “Forty to zero. Game and set! I’m not cut out for this racket.”

—but Boo was not amused. Not that she even understood what was supposed to be funny in the first place.

“Come on. It’s a tennis joke. Should I have gone with Ping-Pong?”

“Nothin’ could’ve saved *that* one,” Sora commented quietly.

Mike flung up his hands. “Wait! Nobody move! I dropped my contact!” he shouted, then dropped to all fours.

“I don’t think Boo’s gonna get it, Mike,” Sulley murmured.

“Do *you* get it?” Sora whispered to the blue monster. He sure didn’t.

“Yeah, it’s ‘cause his eye’s so big,” Sulley explained. “The joke is you can’t lose a contact the size of a dinner plate.”

“Oh, fine!” an indignant Mike shouted.

“Aren’t you supposed to be good at this?” Donald asked accusingly.

Mike was getting frustrated. “I *am*, once I’m warmed up.”

“Sora, do the Funny Face Special.”

“Whaaat? Ugh, if you insist.” Sora crouched down in front of Boo, pretending to be more upset than he really was at Goofy’s suggestion. “Cheeeese!”

He made a goofy smile, and Boo began to laugh.

“Everybody join in!” Sora called, and the entire group began making funny faces at once. Boo jumped up and down with glee, and soon the control unit was loudly sparking while its lights flickered.

Now the shutter would open and let them out of here.

“Sora’s aimin’ for your job,” Sulley said to Mike. Mike didn’t seem too pleased with the idea.

Suddenly, someone called out to them from behind. “You boys aren’t gonna

leave without saying good-bye?”

It was Randall again.

“Give it a rest, Randall. You’re not gonna get away with this,” Mike informed the purple monster.

Even the soft-spoken Sulley sounded especially determined. “We’ll stop anything you throw at us.”

Sora brandished his weapon at the creepy monster, while Donald and Goofy followed his lead.

“Maybe you will,” Randall replied. “Or then again, maybe you won’t. I have still got an ace up my sleeve. Now...,” he said, turning around to some sort of metal contraption behind him, “I command you to destroy them!” But the machine or whatever it was didn’t budge. “Hey. Come on! Move... Move, you stupid—” Randall kicked it, but it just sat there like a lump of metal.

“Looks like your ace is a joker,” Mike quipped as the tension left his body.

“What a pile of junk!” Randall snarled, fading into the background again.

“Wha— Hey!” Sora started after him, but Sulley laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Just leave him,” he said gently. “Don’t think he can cause us any more trouble. Besides, we gotta focus on getting Boo home.”

“You’re right.” Sora sent away his Keyblade.

“Boo’s door has to be somewhere in the vault. Follow me!” Sulley called to everyone, and then Mike pressed the button beside the shutter.

After it rose, Sora and crew made their way into the door vault.

Behind them, in the room they had just left—an inky fog swirled up from the ground to create a path to the Corridors of Darkness.

A man in a black coat stepped out and extended a hand toward the broken machine, causing the Unversed symbol to appear on it. A midnight black, tar-like substance oozed from the machine and congealed together into a massive dome. Once the Unversed finally reached its true shape, it opened its enormous mouth, revealing its glaring, magma-red interior.

The man in the black coat spread his arms wide.

This black mass of hatred isn't just mine. I can create Unversed from other people's emotions now, too. I'm not just wallowing in my own pain anymore; I'm not the kid I used to be.

Part of me is asleep inside of him. I know that now.

If my heart is nothing but hatred, nothing but sorrow and pain and suffering, then what emotions fill the half that's a part of him?

We're not the same. Everything inside of me is darkness, but that kid—Sora—is nothing like me.

This darkness used to be a part of Ventus before we split apart. I was born from it when he became us.

I don't understand anymore. I disappeared once, and then he summoned me again. And now I'm here.

If I connect with Sora, with Ventus, then I can become my true self. What kind of person will I even be? I can't begin to imagine it.

There's a tiny sliver of a memory inside me—a memory from long, long ago, from a distant past. But...why? I disappeared back in the Keyblade Graveyard, and somehow, I already knew that place.

Who did that memory belong to? Me? Ventus? Or someone else?

I have no idea.

One thing I do know—I have to be whole again.

Who am I, really?

I am half of Ventus.

I am—

Sora and his friends finally arrived at the door vault after defeating the Unversed and Heartless along the way.

Once again, they found dozens of doors going by on the rails.

"Everybody look for Boo's door," Sulley called. He was about to get started

when Randall showed up again.

“Didn’t you learn your lesson with that pile-of-junk fiasco?” Mike jeered.

Randall smirked back. “Oh, I learned a lot.” The same machine from before sat behind him.

As Mike walked toward it, Boo ran and cowered behind Sulley. “Kitty?”

“Wait, Mike. Something’s different!”

But Mike ignored Sulley’s warning and turned back with a confident smile. “Oh, please. It’s just more junk.”

Randall cackled mockingly as a thick, black substance began bubbling out from beneath the metal. The goop quickly amassed into a great round lump, looming up before them before forming a creature with bright red magma rippling inside its gaping mouth.

“An Unversed!”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy rushed forward to plant themselves protectively in front of Mike, who edged back in fear.

Sulley lifted his green friend up by the head and looked him straight in the eye. “Mike, time to reach down and let the scary out,” he told him.

Mike slapped himself across the cheek to get into gear. “Oh, I’m ready, Sulley! I’m ready!”

“Finally...,” said Randall. “This is exactly what I need to take over the company. But first, I am getting rid of you. Attack!”

At his command, the Lump of Horror raised its oozing arms and went on the offensive.

“Whoa!” Sora yelped, dodging out of the way as the appendages stretched toward him like they were made of rubber.

Lump of Horror went after everyone else in a similar manner.

“I can’t hurt it!” Sulley shouted. It was true—the creature’s form was so slimy that it simply sucked in Sora’s Keyblade every time he hit it.

“Wak!”

When Donald tried casting spells, Lump of Horror hid the machine on its head and transformed into something resembling a bird, battering the party with wind from its winglike arms. Sora fought his way closer through the gale and found that his hits and Sulley's punches actually struck home when Lump of Horror was in this form.

"Okay, Sulley," Sora shouted, "time for the you-know-what!" The blue monster gave a nod.

"The you-know-what?" Mike asked as he darted around the battlefield.

"You know, this!" Sora grabbed Mike by the head.

"Oh no, not again!"

Sora sent Mike rolling straight into the Unversed. Strike!

Lump of Horror let out a roar as bits of black goo scattered everywhere, eventually turning back into a pile of sludge.

The dark, tarry liquid seeped into the ground, leaving nothing behind but the machine from before.

"Whyyy?!"

Randall scurried over to the remains of the inert Unversed and gave them a kick.

Watching him, Mike noticed something and gestured silently at Sulley, pointing out a battered door to a child's room.

"Got it," the blue monster replied with a thumbs-up.

Mike went for the door, while Sulley hurried over to Randall and startled him with a roar. When the lizard-like monster drew back in surprise, Sulley seized him by the neck, carried him over to the door, and set him down in front of it.

"All right, in ya go."

Mike opened the door for Randall, while Boo angrily stuck her tongue out at him for good measure.

"There's no place for you here anymore, Randall. Now we're in the business of making children laugh." Sulley patted Boo on the head and made her smile

again.

“You think it’s funny?”

“Hilarious! The more you whine, the funnier it gets,” Mike replied with a grin as Randall reluctantly approached the door.

“You clowns are gonna be sorry when I find my way back and I finally take over this place!” he grumbled as he stepped through, his voice growing distant.

Another voice drifted through the door. “Mama, that gator’s in the house again!” It belonged to a child.

“Are you kidding?!” a woman answered. “Oh, this time, he’s in for it.”

Shortly after, they could hear her smacking the daylights out of Randall with who-knows-what.

“So long! Smell ya later,” Mike cackled and shut the door.

“And now we just need to do one last thing,” Sulley said, reaching out to the closed door with his left hand.

Just as he was about to press the red button above its frame, Sora stopped him.

“Hang on! I have a way to lock him out.”

Sora held his Keyblade up to the door.

A keyhole appeared on it, and then a beam of light shot from his Keyblade.

They heard a click as the door was locked for good, then vanished in a flash of light.

“Okay, Boo. Time to go home. You must be tuckered out, but we’ll play together real soon,” Sulley said as he spotted her door among all the others and hopped up onto it.

The rest of the group jumped up to some neighboring doors, which carried them along the rail all the way back to the laugh floor.

The doors came to rest in their fixtures.

Now Boo could finally, finally go home.

No sooner had everyone heaved a mental sigh of relief than they were greeted by a man in a black coat.

“Who are you?”

“Gotta say, the strange façade had me fooled at first, brother.”

Sora leaped down from the door and walked over to the mysterious arrival. The guy in black removed his hood, but his face was still obscured by a mask.

I don't remember anyone calling me brother before, thought Sora. *Still, it feels like I know this guy from somewhere—* “Wait a sec... Oh yeah! You were at the cathedral! And hey! Who are *you* to call anyone strange?”

Sora thought back on their encounter. Yeah, this was probably him. It was in a dream, but they had met once before—in the cathedral of La Cité des Cloches, Quasimodo's world. *He wasn't wearing a mask then, but he definitely feels the same. We're connected somehow. I can tell.*

Nearby, Goofy and Donald puzzled over the question.

“Say, do we know this guy?”

“Uhh...”

“We haven't ever met in the flesh,” said the guy in black. “I am Vanitas.”

Donald and Goofy gasped. They had heard that name before from the king, from back when he fought alongside the three missing Keyblade wielders.

“This is the part where you spout some mumbo jumbo and disappear, right?” Sora said knowingly, but Vanitas ignored him.

“This whole world...was powered by screams. They converted the screams of human children into energy. And this very company made it all happen. It's as rich a source of negative emotion as we'll ever find.”

“For the last time, we already stopped doing that!” Mike protested.

But Vanitas simply picked up an energy canister from one section of the floor and continued. “Did you? Then how do you explain all these canisters of surplus scream? This facility was everything I could hope for. And I was lucky enough to find a pawn whose heart was darkened by thoughts of revenge.”

Mike and Sulley realized immediately that he was referring to their former colleague—and now former resident of Monstropolis. “You mean Randall.”

“All Randall ever cared about was winning. And this guy took advantage of that weakness.”

Randall had gotten his just desserts, to be sure, but they couldn’t believe Vanitas had been using him this whole time.

Vanitas turned to face the two of them. “My heart is made of just one thing. And the Unversed collected enough screams and sadness from those children to reconstruct it,” he explained, lifting the canister of energy into the air.

“Yeah, and the whole time they were trashing our company in the process!” growled Mike. Sulley grabbed him by the head before he could march over and start swinging.

“But, even with all this negative emotion, my heart is still incomplete. I need something else.” Vanitas released the canister, and it went flying through the air. “The half of me...that sleeps on inside your heart.”

Vanitas jabbed his Keyblade at Sora.

“Vanitas!” As the name left Sora’s mouth, he felt the presence of someone within him. “Huh?”

“Ventus...what a strange place to slither off to...you insignificant speck.” Vanitas reached out toward him, but Sora swatted away his hand and took a few steps back.

“What are you talking about?” He didn’t have any idea what Vanitas meant.

I can feel it—I can feel someone, but...

“Oh, you wouldn’t remember. When you were little...you formed a special bond, with a boy named Ventus who joined your heart.”

“Ven!” Donald cried in shock.

“Is he sayin’ that one of the missing Keyblade wielders is inside Sora’s heart?” Goofy asked.

Sora was just as confused. “How is that possible?”

Sulley and Mike watched the three of them warily.

“Now, you will return Ventus to me.”

A strange dark thing arose from Vanitas.

My chest hurts. As Sora dropped to his knees, his two friends moved in to protect him from the violent black wind emanating from Vanitas.

“Donald, Goofy...”

Goofy struggled to stay upright in the gale. “The king told us about this. Ventus wasn’t able to defeat Vanitas. They struck each other down, and then the king said that Ventus’s heart never returned to him!”

“You’re not gonna do that to Sora! No way!” Donald yelled.

But Vanitas sent them flying with an especially powerful burst of dark wind from his hand. “Stay out of this!”

Sora tried to raise his Keyblade, but Vanitas just knocked it away as he slowly approached.

“Sora!” Donald and Goofy shouted.

My chest is killing me—it’s like something squeezing my heart hard enough to break it. But I have to get up.

Sora desperately tried to stand.

“Join your heart...with mine!”

Just as Vanitas was about to pierce Sora’s chest with his Keyblade, a huge shadow loomed up behind him.

“Made you look.” Then Sulley roared.

As Vanitas flinched backward, the big monster seized him in his furry clutches and lifted him into the air.

Vanitas’s Keyblade tumbled to the ground. “Let me go!” He struggled to free himself, but Sulley’s grip was firm.

“Over here, Sulley!” Mike yelled. He had a door ready to go beside him.

Sulley ran over and hurled Vanitas through it. “Okay, now!”

Mike immediately slammed the door shut and ran to open another one. Sulley picked up the first door and threw it through the next, then picked up that one and threw it through the next, over and over until they ran the final door through the shredder.

Sulley and Mike gave each other a high five, and then both gave another high five to Boo.

“That was awesome!” Sora said as he got to his feet. As soon as Vanitas was gone, the pain in his chest vanished like it had never been.

Behind him, Donald and Goofy were just as grateful.

“Thank you.”

“We owe ya.”

Who knows what would have happened if Sulley and Mike hadn’t been there.

“No, *we* should be thanking *you*. We woulda never managed to get Boo this far if you hadn’t come along to help.”

“And finally, we found her door!” Sora knelt down before Boo, who was bouncing around excitedly between Mike and Sulley. “Boo, I know how excited you were to come play with Mike and Sulley. Sorry we dragged you into this.”

“Watch it! You’re gonna scare her with that face!” Donald snapped, jumping in front of him.

“Hey, you are *way* scarier.”

“Gawrsh, I think you’re both scary,” Goofy offered, and everyone chuckled a little.

“Okay, Boo. Time to go,” Sulley said to the little girl.

“We’ll catch up soon, kid,” Mike told her reluctantly, but Boo only looked cheerfully back and forth between him and Donald.

“Mike Wazowski!”

Mike looked back at the other one-eyed monster. “No, that’s Donald, Boo,” he reminded her, and the little girl gave him a hug.

“Mike Wazowski.”

“Better. I’ll see ya, kid.” Mike patted her on the head.

Boo walked toward the white door with pink flowers, ready to go home, but then Sora, Donald, and Goofy called out to her one last time. “Boo!”

When she looked back, the three of them were making funny faces for her. Boo giggled.

“So looong!”

And with that, Boo went home to her room.

Sora and crew headed back to the hall where they had first met Sulley, Mike, and Boo.

Sora turned around toward Mike and Sulley, who had come to see them off. “Sorry for all the headaches we caused.”

“Don’t mention it. And actually, it was kinda nice havin’ an adventure for old times’ sake,” Sulley replied cheerfully.

Mike nodded in agreement. “Yeah, the flying and the falling—nothin’ like running for our lives to get the heart pumping!”

“I had a great time,” Donald instantly replied.

“Donald! All you did was complain!”

“I did not!”

As he and Sora descended into another one of their spirited arguments, Sulley and Mike watched in amusement. They were already used to this by now.

“Any chance that we can drop by again?” Goofy asked.

“The door’s always open,” Mike replied.

Sulley shared the sentiment. “And maybe Boo can join us!”

“Yeah. Good-bye!” Donald called happily, although he was sad to go, too.

I was a little iffy about this world at first, but Sulley and Mike turned out to be really great guys. I’m even used to being a monster now!

“For the record, I still get the most laughs!” Mike called out to Sora as he started to walk away.

“Happy exterminating!” Sulley added.

“Thank you!” Sora, Donald, and Goofy replied, and then they bade this world farewell.

Still...I can't stop thinking about what Vanitas said.

Is Ventus inside of me...?

INTERMISSION

Dark Margin

THE FLOW OF TIME IN THIS WORLD WAS DIFFERENT from the realm of light. Here, it was as fickle as the waves.

The soft whispering of the tide against the sand filled the beach. The sky was dark, as was the water, but beyond the sea, a hazy light hung in the dim, cloudy sky. Perhaps it was the sun, perhaps the moon.

Aqua and a man sat on the shore, staring out at the horizon. She had no idea how long the two of them had been here, but she knew the man had arrived here and met Aqua after the two heroes completed their second adventure and brought peace to the worlds.

The man had told her the name of the boy responsible for saving them.

“His name...is...Sora.”

Tears had run down her cheeks when he told her. *Everything is connected. It’s all connected, even now.*

“Tell me, will you stay here?” asked the man in the black coat, his hood still hiding his face.

Aqua did not know who he was, nor that he had once been called Ansem the Wise.

“I can’t shake the feeling that these waters touch another shore I’ve visited.”

Ansem the Wise knew the place she meant. “The Destiny Islands.”

Aqua was surprised to hear the name from him. How much time had passed since she fell from the realm of light?

“You’ve heard of them?” Aqua smiled and looked over at the man.

“Yes. They are quite lovely—a far cry from this wasteland.” He was smiling faintly, too.

“I’m staying. Someone will come for me.” Aqua’s gaze turned back to the horizon.

“These waters are the in-between of dark and light, its shores the margins of day and night. They brought you and I together, so why not also you and another?”

“Yes.”

Both of them returned their eyes to the light beyond the sea.

An uncertain amount of time passed...until Aqua felt an evil presence behind her.

“Who’s there?” She spun around, ready for trouble.

The man wore a black coat with its hood down, revealing his face. His long silver hair was slicked back, and an aura of darkness oozed from his skin.

Ansem the Wise got to his feet as well, then gasped when he saw who it was.

“You’re...”

It was his former pupil who had stolen his name and plunged willingly into the shadows—Xehanort.

“Master...I must have a word with you.”

Ansem the Wise removed his hood and turned his deep gold eyes on his former apprentice. “‘Master’? So now you mock me.”

“Do you recall those experiments of the heart you bade me cease? Among the test subjects was a girl. She had lost her memory, just as I had. But...you can reconstruct memories. You did with Sora. I believe you have seen the girl’s memories,” Xehanort replied as he strode toward them.

Ansem remained unperturbed. “What is your question?”

“Where did you put the girl?” Xehanort asked accusingly.

“What girl?”

“Very well. If you won’t tell me here...” Xehanort reached out to grab Ansem’s arm, but Aqua jumped in between them and swatted his hand away. She was not holding a Keyblade.

“I think you should go,” she said.

“A lost guardian of light? You wait here...for the king and his fool.” An enormous black shadow rose behind Xehanort and batted her away. “Where’s your Keyblade?”

Aqua landed on the sand a few yards away. “Don’t need it!” she shouted, throwing herself at the dark figure once again. She then sprang into the air and launched a kick at its head. Unfortunately, before she could get back to a safe distance again, the black shadow caught hold of one of her legs and held her dangling in the air.

Ansem the Wise ran over to Aqua. “No more! I’ll go.”

“You are wise,” replied Xehanort with a touch of laughter in his voice.

Aqua used the distraction to kick the shadow with her free leg and escape. Once she was back on the ground, she drew herself up, ready to fight again, and glared furiously at Xehanort.

“Poor thing. I mustn’t leave you with nothing,” Xehanort said.

Pure, near solid darkness gathered in the gaping hole in his guardian’s chest, then burst out in a wave that slammed into Aqua and sent her hurtling toward the black waters of the sea.

The lightless depths drew Aqua down, deeper and deeper, swallowing her up.

What...am I feeling?

She drifted down toward the bottom of the dark abyss.



Chapter 8

100 ACRE WOOD

Chapter 8

100 Acre Wood

THE GUMMI SHIP TOOK OFF FROM MONSTROPOLIS.

Sora needed to decide their next destination, but his mind was occupied with what Vanitas had said. There was someone else in his heart—Ventus. Sora had no idea what would have become of him if Sulley hadn't intervened back there.

He was also concerned about Organization XIII. They were apparently collecting the members they needed much faster than the guardians of light were, and they were even meddling in other worlds now.

Sora raised his head and looked straight forward, then hopped up from his seat and turned to his friends. "We should go to the realm of darkness!"

Donald wasn't having it. "No way!"

"You can't go there until you get the power of waking!" Goofy agreed.

Okay, sure, I don't have the power of waking back, but still—

"But come on, we have to do something! If we don't act, the Organization's gonna win!"

Even if I'm not technically strong enough, there has to be something we can do, Sora thought. And we can't just let the Organization run around wreaking havoc. If we don't stop them, and fast, this could get really ugly.

Donald and Goofy shared an awkward look.

Just then, Jiminy hopped onto Sora's shoulder. He had thoughts on the matter, too. "Sora, do you even *know* how to get to the realm of darkness?"

It was an extremely valid question. After a moment's thought, Sora pulled the Gummiphone from his pocket. "Well, the king and Riku do," he said confidently.

"They won't tell you," Donald pointed out.

“Nope,” said Goofy, “not until you complete your own mission.”

Sora plopped back down in his seat, deflated. *What should I do? I just want to help, but everyone’s got a reason to say no.* “Ugh...!” Sora groaned, then leaned back in his chair. He was out of ideas. *I know I’m not strong enough; you don’t have to remind me.*

That’s when the Gummiphone rang.

Maybe it’s the king! He did say he was about to call me when I called him last time.

And the one who appeared on the screen was...

“Is this a bad time?”

...lenzo. Sora, Donald, and Goofy all heaved a sigh of disappointment. “Aww...”

lenzo was apparently unbothered by the less-than-enthusiastic reply. “So, I have some news about Ansem’s Code and the Replica we need for Roxas’s heart,” he told them calmly.

“Oh!” Jiminy was the first to perk up at the news.

“And...?” Sora prompted.

“First, the Replica. Even is still missing, but we found some of his research. I’ll see what I can learn from it.”

“You’ve got our thanks,” Jiminy said to lenzo with a bow of his head.

“As for Ansem the Wise’s data, we’ve discovered a very interesting passage. I’ll read you exactly what he wrote.”

lenzo then began to read off a report:

I have discovered three unique hearts inside of Sora’s. One is Roxas. The second has been with Sora for nearly as long. And a third has resided in Sora’s heart for even longer—most of his life, in fact.

This is a truly astonishing discovery. While these hearts have now melded with Sora—grown silent and indistinct—Sora retains the memories of all three. The memories have been compartmentalized—each placed in its own “box,” so to

speak.

I surmise the hearts can be awoken, provided that each of them is returned to the box that contains the correct memories. Unite the heart with its memories, and provide it a suitable body within which it may flourish, and I believe any or all three of these people can be made real again.

“Roxas and two more?” Sora murmured to himself.

“Who else?” Jiminy asked.

Vanitas had just mentioned Ventus’s heart earlier, and then there was Roxas. So who could the third heart belong to...?

lenzo continued as Sora mulled over the question. “I also believe I may have found something that could be a backup plan in case we can’t find any Replicas, so I’ll keep looking for that as well.”

“Thank you.” Jiminy dipped his head again.

“Oh,” said Sora. “Thanks, lenzo.”

“Certainly. Take care,” lenzo replied, then immediately ended the call.

“Three different hearts...,” Donald mused behind Sora.

“One of them’s Roxas,” said Goofy. “The other one must be Ventus.”

“You’re gonna believe what Vanitas said?”

“Well, uh...it’s kinda all we got to go on. Sora, do you know who the third one might be?” Goofy asked. He and Donald couldn’t figure it out.

Sora shook his head. “Nope.” *I can’t believe there’s one more, too. But who? I’ve got nothing.*

“Cause Sora can’t count,” Donald joked.

“Hey! That’s not related,” Sora snapped, and everyone shared a little laugh.

A third heart within mine... Who could it belong to? Kairi was a part of me once, and Roxas still is. Same with Ventus. I have no clue who this other one is. But if they can be awakened like Roxas and Ventus, then I’m sure they can come back, too. They’ve been inside me about as long as Roxas, huh—

Suddenly, the Gummiphone rang again.

“Could it be the king this time?!” Donald exclaimed, perking up in his seat, but the caller turned out to be— “Hiya, Sora.”

...Dale, the chipmunk.

“Hey, Dale. What’s up?” Sora peered into the screen with concern, wondering if something happened.

“Chip just got a message from Merlin. Chip! I got him!”

Chip poked his head onscreen beside Dale. “Hi, Sora!”

“Hi, Chip. Does Merlin need us for something?”

“Yep, I think it’s got something to do with some kind of book. He said he’ll have a cup of tea while he waits for ya.”

“A cup of tea where?” Sora asked.

“Oh no!” Chip exclaimed. “He said tea, but he didn’t say where.” He looked to Dale for help.

“He left before I could find out!” Sadly, Dale didn’t know either.

“He’s a tough wizard to pin down.”

On the screen, the two chipmunks shared an exasperated look.

But they had said what needed to be said, so they ended the call there. “Anyway, message delivered. Bye!”

“Where could he be having tea?” Sora crossed his arms in his customary thinking pose. It didn’t help.

“Say, if you were gonna have a cup of tea, wouldn’t you wanna have it at the best restaurant that you could find?”

“Ohh... Of course!” Sora realized what Goofy was getting at.

If you wanted the best dinner and the best cake afterward, there was only one place to go—Little Chef’s bistro.

And now they knew where to go next. Onward to Twilight Town!

The tram was chugging along as usual through the Twilight Town plaza. As

Sora and his friends approached the bistro, a wonderful scent reached their noses.

“Oh boy, am I getting hungry!”

“Shall we eat something while we’re here?”

“Let’s!”

The trio chattered away as they walked, until they found Merlin sipping tea at one of the tables in front of the restaurant.

“Merlin!”

The wizard wore the same blue robe and pointy hat as always, and his beard was still long and white. His round spectacles were the same as before, too. Though he looked a bit like Yen Sid, the two wizards had completely different personalities.

“Ah, greetings, gentlemen. What brings you all the way out here? Besides the finest tea this side of Big Ben, of course.”

“Huh? But...Merlin, I thought that you asked us to stop by.”

“Gracious, did I?” The wizard cocked his head to one side; he honestly didn’t remember.

“Didn’t ya leave a message for us with Chip and Dale?” Goofy reminded him.

“About a book?” Donald added.

Merlin clapped his hands. “Ah! Yes, the book. That’s right,” he said as it all came back to him. He reached into the large bag sitting nearby and removed a tome with magnificent binding. “Behold.”

The words *100 Acre Wood* were written on the cover. This book contained a world Sora had visited before, the forest where Winnie the Pooh and his friends lived. Sora remembered how he had tracked down pages torn from the book to give to Merlin and open up new places to go.

But—

“Hey, this is...,” Sora said, noticing something troubling.

Donald was surprised, too, and pointed out the error. “Sora’s not on it.”

The second time Sora had visited, the Heartless had torn up the pages and made Pooh forget all his friends. He eventually remembered everyone, and Sora had appeared on the cover alongside him. But now, Pooh was all alone.

“Did somethin’ happen?” Goofy asked with concern.

“Well, that’s what you need to find out, lad.”

“Okay, got it,” said Sora, taking the book from Merlin.

“You’re the only one who can go inside, right?”

“Yeah, so you guys wait for me here,” Sora told Goofy. While Donald held the book for him, Sora pointed his Keyblade at its cover, where Pooh sat gazing at the stars all by himself. “Okay, I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Take care.”

“Yes, and good luck.”

After Merlin and Goofy said their farewells, light shot from the Keyblade and drew Sora into the book.

Inside the book—in Winnie the Pooh’s world—everything was as peaceful and calm as before. He walked through the beautiful forest, listening to the birds sing, and spotted the big tree that served as Pooh’s home nearby.

“Oh, bother. Think, think, think...” The bear was sitting out in front of his home, apparently trying his hardest to think of something.

Piglet was beside him; Sora remembered fondly how the little guy had been so frightened of him the first time they met.

“Pooh Bear! You okay?”

“Oh! Hello there, Sora.” Pooh looked up slowly, then hopped to his feet. “You’re home.”

“Uh...huh? Good to see you, Pooh. And you, too, Piglet,” Sora said, bending over a bit as he greeted the two. Pooh was a teddy bear, and Piglet was a plushie of...well, a piglet.

“You’re not in trouble? But I thought something odd must be going on.”

“Hmm, let me see... I don’t remember anything oddish, but perhaps I’ve

forgotten. Think, think, think..." Pooh Bear fell back into thought.

"Oh, we've got trouble all right!" someone called from behind Sora. It was Rabbit.

"Would that be the Rabbit sort of trouble?" Piglet asked, and quickly received a glare for the interruption. "S-s-s-sorry, please continue," he stammered in fear.

"Sora!"

Sora recognized the voice calling his name, but not the young elephant he saw walking toward him.

Huh? That's funny, he thought, but then Roo the kangaroo hopped into view from the elephant's back. "It's okay. He's my friend," he said, turning back to the elephant.

"Hi, I'm Sora."

"And I'm Lumpy! It's nice to meet you," the elephant said with a happy stomp of his feet.

Just then, Gopher popped his head out from his underground home. He looked a little angry. "Sufferin' sassafras! Stomp around a little louder, why don't ya?"

The stomps must have been pretty loud underground.

"I kind of like it when the ground gets bouncy."

"Well, I suppose if something has to bounce..." Gopher started to say, but then he heard a very familiar sound. It was getting louder and louder, closer and closer—*boing, boing, boing*.

"Speaking of..."

Right as Gopher turned around, Tigger the toy tiger gave Sora a big hug.

The two of them toppled to the ground, and Tigger laughed cheerfully from where he sat on Sora's belly. "Back for some more bouncin', Sora? C'mon, let's go!" Tigger bounced around happily on his springy tail, then hopped his way over to Roo and Lumpy. "You too, Roo!"

“Yippee!”

“Me, too! Me, too! I wanna bounce!”

Roo began to jump, while Lumpy stamped his feet.

“Say no more! All would-be bouncers are welcome.” Right as Tigger got everyone assembled, Pooh finally looked up from his long moment of contemplation.

“Oh, I remember now. Rabbit’s troubles are harvest related.”

“Well, thank *you* for remembering my plight, Pooh. Better late than never,” Rabbit said with a look at the bear, then turned toward the bouncing trio. “*Excuse me!* Would anyone else care to remember why we’re here?” he shouted.

Tigger, Roo, and Lumpy stopped and thought his question over.

“As I recall, we came here to help you with your garden, Rabbit,” Pooh answered in his calm, contented way. “After which, perhaps you’ll invite us in for a smackeral or two of honey?”

“Correct. No. No! I mean, we’ll see about that, Pooh. Now, the garden, if you please? You can help, too, Sora,” Rabbit instructed everyone, then started to leave.

“What? Me, too?” Sora asked.

“Now then, to the garden!”

Tigger bounced along after him. “I’m gonna help, too!”

Sora reluctantly followed Rabbit with the rest of the group, to the vegetable patch in front of Rabbit’s house.

“We’ll start with the carrots!”

“Okay...”

The whole group entered the garden and picked carrots, then garlic, and then the pumpkins lying on the ground, along with ripe tomatoes, eggplants, and zucchini.



It was the first time Sora had harvested things straight from the field like this.

“You help, too, Tigger,” Sora called.

“Sure thing!” Tigger stopped idly bouncing around and joined in the work.

“You want me to pick ’em all?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Sora ran around the garden gathering produce, while Pooh and his friends sorted it into different baskets until they were all full.

“What a harvest!” Rabbit cried.

“Thanks to Sora’s help,” Piglet said. Sora brushed some sweat off his forehead.

Rabbit seemed quite pleased with his armload of carrots. “Yes, quite right. Thank you, Sora!”

Meanwhile, Tigger was boinging along beside them. “Well, how’s about a little more bouncin’?” he suggested, and Lumpy joined in.

Next Sora was asked to help with the fruit in the orchard, and then the flowers in the garden.

Once his work there was done, he plopped down on the ground feeling just the right amount of tired.

Everything was as lovely as ever here in this world. Everyone was getting along fine, it was a beautiful day, and he couldn’t see anything majorly unusual at work here.

“Well, looks like your problem’s solved. Guess I’ll be on my way,” Sora said as he got to his feet and brushed the dirt off his clothes.

Rabbit held out a big jar to Pooh. “Here, Pooh. A pot full of honey. It’s your reward for being such a big help. Eat all you want.”

“Oh, thank you, Rabbit!” Pooh accepted the honey and immediately dipped in a paw.

A sudden breeze carried flower petals dancing through the air, and Tigger bounced after them.

“Look at ‘em all. They’re bouncin’ even higher than me!”

They all watched the colorful petals fluttering across the clear blue sky. The view was especially beautiful.

“Sora, I believe the one I should thank for all that yummy, delicious honey is you,” said Pooh.

Sora knelt down. “Don’t mention it, Pooh,” he replied. “Besides, we all helped.”

“Um, Sora?” the bear said, seeming to have remembered something. He put a hand to his chest and asked, “You used to be right here. Why is it that you went away?”

Sora was confused. “Away? Oh, *that’s* what you meant by ‘you’re home.’” Now he understood why Pooh had greeted him the way he did.

Pooh’s face fell a little. “Yes. You see, when I get a rumble in my tummy, it’s very hard to think of anything but honey. So I was worried that I might have forgotten you away.”

“Silly bear, I’d never.”

“Oh, good, because I want us to be together forever.”

“Pooh. We are together. There isn’t a second that we’re not.” Sora started to reassure him, but then a wave of unease came over him.

Maybe our connection is growing weaker. Why is that? My heart did almost become a vessel for Xehanort back when I was nearly trapped in the Sleeping Worlds. Could that have something to do with it?

And I think maybe everyone forgot about me when I went to sleep to recover my memory before that, too. Maybe it’s the same as back then...? Or could it be

—

“What’s wrong, Sora?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. What matters is I’ll be here from now on. No going away,” Sora said, pointing a finger at Pooh’s chest. *I won’t be disappearing from anyone’s heart again.*

“Thank you, Sora.”

A strong gust of wind blew past them, sending more flower petals dancing up into the sky.

And with that...

The image of Sora reappeared on the cover of Pooh’s book, and shortly after, Sora himself returned to the table at the bistro in a flash of light.

“Splendid. All is as it should be,” Merlin told him.

“But how come Sora’s picture disappeared in the first place?” Donald asked, walking up.

Instead of answering, Sora just looked at the flagstones.

“Sora?” Goofy peered into his friend’s face with concern.

“Something’s happened to me that made me vanish from Pooh’s heart. Merlin, I don’t ever want to lose my friends.”

Somehow...I know it has to be Xehanort’s doing. I don’t want to fade from anyone else’s heart.

“Well, now,” Merlin said with a stroke of his beard.

Sora looked up. “Huh?”

“There’s no need to fret, lad. Whatever’s lost can be found again. There are always new paths between hearts for us to discover and traverse,” the wizard informed Sora gently. He showed him the cover of the book with Sora and Pooh together. “But you already know that.”

“Yeah!”

Sora’s grin returned, and Merlin smiled as well.

After saying good-bye to Sora, Donald, and Goofy as they resumed their travels, Merlin hefted his bag over his shoulder.

Oh, yes—I need to buy some more of that sea-salt ice cream.

His pupils’ training was strenuous but proceeding nicely. In fact, these were the first young trainees he had taken on since Sora.

The king and Riku had paid Merlin a visit at his home in Radiant Garden a short time ago, to deliver two bags from Yen Sid. They had even needed new Keyblades themselves.

Well, well. I wonder where they are now.

Perhaps they were working toward some great and noble purpose, but Merlin didn't know anything about that. He merely aided those who came to him in need.

Training two youngsters to become full-fledged Keyblade wielders is hard work indeed. But I would never refuse a favor for my good friend Yen Sid, much less the king.

Merlin might have been getting on in years, but he wasn't a hunched-over old man just yet. With a weary slap to his hip, he went on his way.

INTERMISSION

Letter II

Merlin brought us some new clothes the other day. He said Master Yen Sid made them for us. Did he give you a new outfit, too? Axel isn't wearing his. I'm not sure why; he hasn't told me. Maybe he just really likes that coat.

Training is going well. Axel and I can pretty much summon our Keyblades whenever we want now, and we spar every day. He's stronger than me because he used to be a member of Organization XIII, but he gives me lots of pointers. He's always asking me if I've "got it memorized," but just because I know something in my head doesn't mean it's easy to make my body do it.

By the way, have you ever had sea-salt ice cream? Merlin buys it for us all the time. It tastes salty and sweet at the same time—and somehow familiar, too. Axel loves it, but he always looks a little wistful when he eats it.

How's Riku doing? He's gotten really tall, huh? I bet you're taller now, too. I'm looking forward to seeing the two of you again. Oh yeah, Riku also cut his hair, didn't he?

Next time you see him, tell him I like it better this way.

Well, I'll write you more later.



Chapter 9

A R E N D E L L E

Chapter 9

Arendelle

AFTER THEY LEFT TWILIGHT TOWN, SORA, DONALD, AND GOOFY arrived in a new world.

“It’s *cold!!!*” Sora wrapped his arms around himself, shivering. It was nighttime, and they were standing in the middle of some snow-covered mountains. Everything was white as far as the eye could see, and the snow was still falling.

“Donald, gimme a coat!” Sora shouted, almost frozen to the bone. *I can’t stay in this world with short sleeves!*

“The magic doesn’t work that way,” Donald snapped, turning away.

“Guess he’s too used to the beach!”

“Hey, I’m an islander! What can I say?” Sora complained back to Goofy, rubbing his arms to keep warm. Snow was unheard-of on the blue waters and blue skies of the Destiny Islands. Sora had been to Christmas Town before, so he wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with this kind of weather, but he’d never been this cold in his life.

“*You* guys have long sleeves, but I don’t!”

“Aw, you’ll be fine.”

“No, I won’t!” Sora complained, turning around toward Donald, when he suddenly noticed something. “...Huh?” *The water’s freezing over, but it’s starting from the shore by that cove...* “Donald, this isn’t *your* magic, is it?”

Donald shook his head. He’d noticed the water, too, but he seemed just as confused.

“Do ya think it’s the Heartless?”

Sora took off running for the shore to see if Goofy’s fears were right. “Might

be. Let's go."

The cold isn't so bad if I keep moving, at least. This world is so quiet and dark—and freezing, too, obviously. I don't know why, but it makes me really...sad.

As they approached the edge of the water, Sora and his friends spotted a woman dashing across the surface with her purple cloak flapping behind her. With each step, the water froze beneath her feet. Sora also noticed the expression on her face, full of regret and grief.

"I wonder what happened."

"Maybe the Heartless? We should talk to her," Goofy suggested with concern as they watched her hurry off into the mountains. Maybe he felt the same as Sora.

The snow was still falling, but not as heavy as before. The winds were dying down, too. Where had she gone?

It's kinda hard to walk in this snow; my feet keep sinking down.

Sora and crew found the object of their search just as they were approaching a valley.

"Hey, hold up!" Sora called, and the woman turned their way. She was wrapped in a purple cloak, and she seemed frightened. She was wearing only one glove, on her right hand.

"Why are you here? Where did you come from?" she asked.

"Hi. I'm Sora, and I—" Sora was about to answer honestly, until Donald shot him a look that shut him up. *Oh yeah, world order!* "Uh...I'm from...let's just say someplace...a little warmer."

Nodding in satisfaction at Sora's discretion, Donald introduced himself. "I'm Donald."

"And I'm Goofy."

The woman watched them carefully, then paused in thought for a moment. "Are you visiting Arendelle? For the coronation?"

What's a coronation? Sora wasn't sure, but Donald and Goofy were nodding.

Maybe the best way to keep our cover is to just play along and act like I know what she's talking about. "Uh... You got us! So, what's your name?"

The woman clasped her hands in front of herself. "Elsa... Queen Elsa of Arendelle," she replied, her voice firm and resolute.

"What? The queen?!" Sora and friends exclaimed, snapping to attention.

If she's a queen, she must be really special. Well, not all the queens I've met were on the up and up, but I can tell Elsa isn't like that, at least. She's very royal—just maybe having a rough time right now.

The queen averted her eyes. "You shouldn't be out here. Please go back to the village," she said, then turned and began to walk away.

"Why? Your Majesty, you look like you could use a friend. Don't you want to talk?" Sora asked, concerned for her.

Elsa stopped, but she didn't turn around. "Please leave," she said curtly, rejecting his attempt at kindness. "I need to be alone. I don't want to hurt anyone."

Sora wasn't about to stop trying, though. "Oh... Is it that bad? You must've been through a lot."

"We know what that's like, don't we?" Donald added, trying to help get through to her.

Goofy jumped in, too. "Sure, adventuring's fun, but it definitely has its ups and downs. When the going gets tough, us friends have to stick together!" It was so important to have others by your side.

"Exactly! Although, Donald, you *do* lose your temper a lot, so...I can relate to wanting some alone time," Sora quipped before the conversation could get *too* heavy. He stepped closer to Elsa.

"What? I don't do that!" Donald quacked back, taking the bait.

However—while they were busy bantering, the snow had started to pick up again.

Elsa's head lowered, her hands clenched into fists, and then she spun around toward the trio. "*Enough!*" she cried, and as a glow burst from her left hand,

spikes of ice jutted out of the ground toward them.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy were stunned.

“Elsa... Did you...”

She shrank back in fear, as if shocked by her own actions, and the blustering, snowy winds began to wane. Several dark forms appeared behind her.

“The Heartless!”

Sora and crew rushed to Elsa’s defense with Keyblade, staff, and shield.

“Don’t worry. We got ’em. Take cover!”

The queen complied with a small nod and backed away while Sora and his friends went for the Heartless.

Fittingly enough, the Heartless of this frozen world were particularly icy. The ones they were fighting now resembled white deer with antlers made of ice.

“I bet something hot will do the trick. Something like...Fire!” Donald’s spell melted away the antlers of one of the deer. Sora shot off a Fire spell of his own, then followed it up with a strike from his Keyblade. While their icy nature made them a little more resilient than usual, these weren’t exactly the strongest Heartless he’d ever seen.

“And that takes care of that!”

Once all the creatures were gone, Elsa cautiously crept out of hiding and made her way back to Sora.

“Elsa, are you okay?” Sora asked.

“I...I’m sorry I was so upset. Thank you for your help.”

However, one more foe remained. As Elsa offered her thanks, a Heartless burst out from under the snow and pounced at Sora, Donald, and Goofy from behind.

Elsa was the first to notice. “Look out!” She held out her gloveless left hand and shot a bolt of ice from it that vanquished the Heartless instantly.

“That’s amazing. You can control ice,” Sora said, marveling at her incredible ability, but Elsa only lowered her gaze and hid her left hand with the right one.

“Control it?” she said softly. “No, all I ever do...is hurt people.”

“It’s okay. Those were just the Heartless,” said Goofy, trying to reassure her.

After a moment, Elsa looked up and asked, “You said that word before. What are they?”

“Monsters that are after people’s hearts. Wherever they go, there’s trouble,” Sora explained. Of course she wouldn’t know why such creatures were appearing in her world.

“They’re after people’s hearts?” Her eyes lowered again to her hands.

“Yes, they’re dangerous! You should go home before it gets any worse.”

Elsa’s definitely strong, but that doesn’t mean she’s safe, thought Sora. The worst thing about Heartless was they took advantage of the darkness within people’s hearts—and fear was one such form of darkness.

Elsa only shook her head, though, having already made her choice. “This is my home now. I can’t go back. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“What?” Sora asked, worried.

“Arendelle is safer with me staying here,” Elsa declared firmly, then made to take her leave.

“Not safer for you!” Sora persisted, but then a wall of ice rose up from the ground in front of him, Donald, and Goofy—embodying Elsa’s rejection of them in her heart.

“Please, go away!” she shouted from the other side of the barrier.

They had no way of going after her now.

“Elsa...” Sora pressed his hands against the wall.

“Aw, don’t worry, she’ll be okay,” Goofy reassured him. “Seems like she’s pretty strong.”

“You gotta let her go. She wants to be alone,” said Donald.

“Yeah, I hear you...but I just wanted to know why she was so sad,” he muttered softly with concern. The sadness on her face had been obvious, but it wasn’t the only emotion there.

Sora fell into thought. *Even if Donald and Goofy are right and we should leave Elsa alone, what do we do now?*

The three of them were mulling it over when they heard a woman's voice out of the blue. "And how is it any of your business? Read the room, kiddo."

They whirled around to see a blond-haired woman wearing one of the Organization's coats. For some reason, her hair was all slicked back except for two pieces that stuck up like antennae.

"Who are you? That's...the Organization coat. You new?" Sora asked. He'd never seen her before—never seen any girls in the Organization, actually. Either way, she had a major attitude.

"Excuse me? Oh yeah, you forgot. The name's Larxene. Next time, remember. And we'll take care of Elsa, so don't you worry," she haughtily informed Sora.

"Why are you after Elsa?" *So the Organization's up to their tricks here, too.*

"No one's gonna hurt her. But we're not about to put up with your meddling. Stay here and behave yourselves."

Larxene extended her hand toward the wall of ice and shot a powerful bolt of white lightning from her palm. The whole thing exploded into chunks that began piling up around Sora and his friends.

"Wawawak!"

"Wait. The ice!"

"It's going to wall us in!"

Larxene smirked at their panic. "Ice is so not my style," she sighed, just as the final hunk of ice slammed down in front of Sora, Donald, and Goofy to complete their prison.

"Larxene!" Sora yelled, but his voice couldn't reach her through the wall. They were completely, decisively trapped. "What's with this place...?"

A look around revealed they were now in a whole labyrinth built of ice.

"Anybody see a way out?" Sora sighed and sagged in defeat. The ceiling, the walls, the floor—everything was all ice, so he had no idea what to do.



“No, not me.” Donald’s head swiveled back and forth anxiously.

“Well, we just gotta find one,” Sora said reassuringly.

“Elsa’s in *real* trouble now.” Goofy was right. For now, they had to keep on pushing ahead.

“Yeah. Larxene promised not to hurt her, but I trust those guys as far as I can throw ’em.”

Elsa could definitely hold her own against the Heartless, but if the Organization was involved, that was another story.

Donald didn’t want to abandon Elsa, either. “They’ve gotta be up to no good!”

“Let’s go, then!”

Sora and crew set out to find an exit to the maze.

No one understands me.

Elsa was trudging through the snowy mountains alone.

She possessed a special power, a magical ability to create and control snow and ice. She’d had these powers ever since she was born as the first princess of Arendelle, although no one knew why. As a child, she used to play with her ice and snow, but ever since she’d hurt her younger sister with it, she had come to fear her power. There was no telling when it might harm someone else...

Her sister’s life had been saved thanks to the trolls, but her power grew stronger with each passing day, until Elsa had begun to lock herself away in the castle in terror of what it might do. When her parents, the king and queen, perished in a tragic accident at sea, the time came for Elsa to assume her role as ruler of this land.

Today was meant to be her coronation. However, she had failed to control her magical ability before all the visiting dignitaries who had come to see her take the throne. They had called her a monster, and she fled the castle. Now, the verdant countryside of Arendelle was covered by ice and snow. And it was all because of her...

Elsa walked on in solitude.

As long as I have this power, I'll never be able to live with other people. I'll always be at risk of hurting someone. And if that's how it must be...

After dealing with tons of annoying tricks and tedious numbers of Heartless, Sora, Donald, and Goofy finally burst through the exit of the icy labyrinth.

They took a breather on the mountaintop, where the snow was still falling.

"See her?"

"I think she mighta gone in that direction," said Goofy, who was looking down a path leading farther into the mountains. Any footprints Elsa might have left had been covered up by the snowfall, but Sora and his comrades weren't about to let that deter them.

"Okay, c'mon!"

They continued making their way up the snow-piled ridges, and as soon as they reached the summit, they were blasted by a full-on blizzard.

"Man, what gives...?" Sora groaned, just as he heard singing coming from somewhere. The snowy winds were carrying the voice from far away.

The snow glows white on the mountain tonight

Not a footprint to be seen

A kingdom of isolation

And it looks like I'm the queen

The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside

Couldn't keep it in, heavens know I've tried

"...What?" Goofy with his sharp ears was the first to recognize the singer.

Sora and Donald quickly perked up as well. "That's Elsa's voice!"

The melancholy in her singing made their hearts ache, but it was also truly beautiful.

Don't let them in

Don't let them see

Be the good girl you always have to be

Conceal, don't feel

Don't let them know

Well, now they know

Sora took off running against the winds of the storm and toward the song—and he soon found Elsa not much farther ahead, up near the very top of the mountain.

She threw away her single remaining glove, and countless snowflakes, each as beautiful as flowers, danced in and out of existence on her bare palm. Then, she created a little snowman.

Let it go! Let it go!

Can't hold it back anymore

Let it go! Let it go!

Turn away and slam the door

The look on Elsa's face was far more peaceful than when they had first met her. The little crystals of ice around her glittered like jewels.

I don't care what they're going to say

Let the storm rage on

The cold never bothered me anyway

Elsa shed her cloak with radiant joy, and the wind carried it away. The melancholy was gone from her song, and the blizzard had subsided as well.

It's funny how some distance

Makes everything seem small

And the fears that once controlled me

Can't get to me at all

Elsa broke into a run toward a place where she would be truly alone.

It's time to see what I can do.

To test the limits and break through

No right, no wrong, no rules for me

I'm free!

She created a frozen stairway from her hands and placed her foot on the first step. Snow became ice, and with a flash the stairs became a magnificent sculpture. Elsa raced up its steps with glee.

Let it go! Let it go!

I am one with the wind and sky

Let it go! Let it go!

You'll never see me cry

Here I stand and here I'll stay

Let the storm rage on

Sora and crew stared up at her handiwork in awe. When she reached the top of the stairs, Elsa stomped her foot. A crystal of ice like a royal crest formed out around her foot, and from it, a castle began rising from the ground to greet her.

My power flurries through the air into the ground

My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around

And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast

Most people saw ice as something frigid and lifeless, but these structures were like beautiful flowers welcoming her home. Sora, Donald, and Goofy watched, breathless.

I'm never going back

The past is the past

Let it go! Let it go!

And I'll rise like the break of dawn

Let it go! Let it go!

That perfect girl is gone

Elsa abandoned her tiara, and her beautiful, exquisitely arranged hair tumbled

to her shoulders as a braid. Her clothes transformed, too, into a gleaming blue dress and a swirling cape with thousands of tiny ice crystals like diamonds.

Here I stand in the light of day

Let the storm rage on!

The cold never bothered me anyway

With the last line of her song, the sun broke through the horizon.

Elsa strode to the balcony as a true snow queen, full of confidence, gazed at the breaking dawn, and grinned. With a swirl of her cape, she marched back into her castle, and the doors of the balcony slammed shut behind her.

“Wow. I don’t know what we just saw but...wow. That...was Elsa?” Sora whispered in awe as he took in the view of the castle.

“She looked different...,” said Donald.

“And a lot happier, too...,” added Goofy.

His friends seemed as starstruck as he was, and they were having trouble even finding the words.

Still, the Organization was up to something in this world, so they had to speak to Elsa.

Unfortunately, Larxene chose that very moment to appear right in their way from a Corridor of Darkness. “*Please* don’t tell me that you’re spying on her now.”

“Larxene! Don’t turn this around on us. *You’re* following her,” Sora retorted, ready for a fight.

Larxene answered with a mocking snort. “Ooh. Look at *you* get all sassy. Okay, I’ll admit Elsa is a person of interest to us. Maybe she’s one of the seven pure lights we need—the New Seven Hearts. Gotta make sure though. Fortunately, we’re in the best position to tell. Can’t pick out that special ‘glimmer’...unless you’re standing in the shadows.”

The New Seven Hearts—that Marluxia guy mentioned them, too.

Larxene turned and admired Elsa’s bastion. “And maybe...Elsa *doesn’t* have it.

I mean, just look at how icy her palace is—made of magic she forced herself to keep hidden until now. What if it's dark magic?" She seemed fascinated by the idea.

"Elsa would never rely on the darkness!" Sora rejected that possibility immediately. *Dark magic? No way.*

"Actually, it's still too early to call. Depends on how *she* sees it. If she believes her magic is darkness, that's what it will become. Accepting her power, whatever it is, is the only way she can set her heart free. So what will Elsa accept? Light or darkness? I know / wanna know!"

Elsa's power was undeniable; she could even take out Heartless in an instant. But that didn't mean anything.

"Well, good for you, but guess what? I won't let her fall to darkness!" Sora vowed.

"It's her choice, not yours. You know, I'm starting to understand why she gave you the cold shoulder."

Larxene held up her left hand, crackling with lightning, and then blasted them with a powerful gust of wind.

"Larxene!"

Sora, Donald, and Goofy tried their hardest to resist, but...

"You wanna help her? Then stop trying to be her hero! Let her figure things out her own way!"

The crackling electricity around Larxene grew brighter, and the gust hammered against the trio with renewed force while it sucked up the snow nearby.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy could hardly keep their eyes open, and when the bolts of lightning started battering them, too, it was no surprise when the storm sent them right off the edge of the mountain.

Next time, remember.

I said that—but I feel like I've forgotten something important myself.

Not that remembering's done much good for me. But...some things, you shouldn't forget. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've let a lot slip away already—things I really shouldn't have. There's a lot of those.

Recently, it's been hard to tell if I really remember or not. This isn't the first time, either. I don't know how many times it's happened before—but I can tell it's more than one. It feels...weird, like waking up from a dream.

Or maybe it's all in my head.

Ugh, they all look so stupid, scrabbling around to accomplish their little goals. Just like in the castle, when we were trying to take over the Organization. To this day, I still wonder why Marluxia chose me as his partner in crime. I can't remember, if he ever told me at all, and I can't even begin to guess.

Ah well.

Maybe it'll come back to me one of these days.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy regained consciousness in the mountains.

"Donald! Goofy! Are you okay?" Sora pushed himself up as he spotted his friends.

Donald was stuck headfirst in the snow, and he had to kick his feet for a moment before finally managing to pull himself out. "I'm okay..."

Goofy was completely buried in a drift except for his arms. Sora took hold of his hands and pulled. "All good!"

Thankfully, the snow was soft enough that none of them had any injuries.

"I think we should probably go check on Elsa," Sora said. He never was one to give up.

"And make sure Larxene was wrong about her magic," Goofy added.

While Elsa's power was a cause for concern, Sora also wanted to be sure to tell the queen to watch out for the Organization.

"But don't you tell her what Larxene said," Donald warned him.

"Huh? Why not?"

"Well, to keep the order," Goofy reminded.

Sora thought it over for a moment. “Oh... Okay.” *Guess I’ll just have to let her know she’s in danger without bringing up anything Larxene said.* “All right, let’s get moving.”

Sora had just turned to head back to the castle when one of Goofy’s ears twitched. “Wait, fellas. Do ya hear that?” He stood stock-still with one ear up.

“Look!” Donald exclaimed as he looked toward the source of the noise—a wall of powdery snow barreling down from the mountaintop at tremendous speed.

“Avalaaanche!” the trio screamed.

Goofy swiftly grabbed his shield and threw it on top of the snow. “Quick, climb aboard!”

Sora and Donald hopped on, and Goofy quickly joined them. They were going to use the shield as a sled to stay ahead of the falling snow.

“Here we go!”

To make matters worse, a Heartless shaped like a dragon made of ice called a Frost Serpent emerged from the snow and began chasing them as they raced down the mountain.

“Ack!”

The Frost Serpent’s icy breath hit them full blast, and Donald would have fallen off the shield if Sora hadn’t grabbed hold of his shirt.

“C’mon, c’mon!”

Sora and Donald fired off spells at the Heartless as they wove their way through the trees. They managed to stop the Frost Serpent, but the avalanche finally overtook them and knocked out the three friends yet again.

“Wow! Look at all the pretty colors. There’s blue, and green—ooh, I love green! And look, black.”

Sora heard a strange voice.

“Just like my buttons. Hmm?”

He felt something weird on his head, too. Sora blinked his eyes open and saw

landscape covered with the same familiar snow, except— “Silly spiky grass. Give me back my foot.”

Something plucked a ball of snow from Sora’s head and attached it as its own foot, then tromped off. From behind, it looked like...a snowman?

Sora sat up, confused. “Huh? Uh...did you see that snowman?”

“Snowman?” asked Donald, who had just regained consciousness himself.

“Yeah. And here’s the funny thing: He was walking and talking.”

“Everybody knows snowmen can’t walk. You must have imagined it,” Donald argued, and now Sora wasn’t so sure anymore.

“Huh... I thought he was real.”

I wonder what it was, then.

Goofy had apparently noticed the visitor, too. “Well, maybe we’ll see him again. But if we don’t get goin’, we’ll never reach Elsa’s palace.”

Oh yeah, we were on our way to talk to Elsa. “C’mon!”

Sora and his friends started making their way through the forest. Tiny, twinkling crystals of ice hung from the trees like new blossoms.

It wasn’t long before they saw some people crossing their path ahead. There was a man in the lead, followed by a woman, a reindeer, and then— “I can’t wait to meet Elsa. I bet she’s the nicest, warmest, best person ever.”

—the snowman! He seemed very excited about something.

“See? I told you!” Sora crowed. “A walking, talking snowman.”

“Well, whaddaya know? You were right!” Goofy nodded next to Donald, who was paralyzed with shock.

“I wanna look!” Sora rushed over and jumped out in front of the snowman. He had a carrot nose and sticks for arms, and even a few small twigs in his head for hair. “Wow! You really *are* alive! What’s making you walk?”

“Um, well, I guess...my feet.” The snowman showed Sora one of the two snowballs he used to walk.

Then, the girl who had been traveling with the group approached. For someone who was friends with a snowman, she seemed like a very normal young woman, with auburn hair she wore in two braids. "Hello. Olaf, are these your friends?"

"Nope! Never met 'em. Don't know anyone blue, green, or who's oddly spiky," said the snowman named Olaf, shaking his head.

"'Spiky'? My hair? Wait, why don't I get a color, too? My name is Sora."

"And I'm Donald Duck!"

The two stepped closer to Olaf, not particularly pleased by his choice of description.

"Oh," replied Olaf.

Goofy, on the other hand, introduced himself as calmly as ever. "And I'd be Goofy the Green!"

"I'm Anna," said the girl. The man next to her crossed his arms and eyed them suspiciously. "And I know they're strangers, but...they seem pretty nice to me," Anna told him.

Finally, he nodded to her and then dipped his head in greeting to Sora and crew. "I'm Kristoff, and this is Sven," he said, introducing the reindeer next to him.

"Nice to meet ya," Goofy said back.

"So, where are all you guys headed?" Sora asked, and Anna and Kristoff shared a look.

Kristoff was the one who answered first. "We're going to try and put an end to this crazy winter."

"And to do that, we need to find my sister, Elsa," Anna added, much to Sora's surprise.

"Elsa's...your sister?"

Now that you mention it, Anna and Elsa do look alike.

"What a coincidence. We're going to see her, too," Goofy told her.

An apprehensive look passed over Anna's face. "You know Elsa?"

"Yeah, we ran into her up the mountain. Do you mind telling us what's going on here?"

Sora wanted to tell them everything he could, especially since she was one of the New Seven Hearts the Organization kept talking about. But he wasn't allowed to talk about anything Larxene had mentioned.

"We're worried. We think your sister might be in some trouble."

"Trouble? Are you sure?" Anna's calm expression quickly turned to worry, and she looked at Sora closely. "All right. I know we just met, but...Sora, was it? I get the feeling that you're someone to trust."

"I'm right there with ya," Kristoff agreed.

"I just hope you like long stories."

Kristoff patted Sven the reindeer on the head. "Ya know, I should go find some moss for Sven. He's looking a little hungry. C'mon, Sven."

Olaf started scampering around excitedly. "Hey, w-w-w-wait, what's going on? Tell me. Is something happening?" he asked, but Kristoff just picked him up, too. The situation was complicated, he knew, and he wanted to give Sora and Anna some space to talk.

"C'mon, Olaf. You're with me."

"Sure, Sven. Reindeer Sven, too?"

"The reindeer *is* Sven."

The two of them bantered back and forth as they walked away.

Once Anna saw they were gone, she sat down on a fallen tree nearby, and Sora joined her.

"When we were little, my sister and I used to be really close," she said, beginning her tale. "But then, one day, for some reason, Elsa just shut me out. We used to build snowmen together, but now Elsa hardly ever left her room. Years passed and we barely saw each other. Then, finally, it was time for her coronation. Let's just say I was more than a little excited. I thought we'd finally

have a chance to talk. But at the party, I did something that made her mad. We got into an argument, and I lost my temper. I was just so frustrated! And then, well...that's when she used her magic to push me away. It was all my fault."

Anna lowered her eyes, trying not to cry.

"I shouldn't have upset her the way I did. Elsa ran away because she was frightened. I have to bring her home."

"I'm sure she knows how much you love her."

Sora did some reminiscing of his own.

Elsa looked like she was carrying some awful burden when I saw her before, and now I remember where I saw it. It was the expression Riku had when he disappeared and we closed the door to Kingdom Hearts.

Sometimes you push people away because they matter so much to you. I know Elsa loves Anna a whole lot.

"If anyone can help her, it's you."

That was what Sora wanted her to know, that she and her sister could be as close as they once were, just as he and Riku were fighting alongside each other now.

"Thanks," she replied with a smile.

Suddenly, they heard Kristoff calling out to them. "Hey, guys! I need some help!"

With a quick look at each other, Sora and Anna stood up from the log and hurried over to Kristoff and the others.

"What's the problem?"

"This." Kristoff had a single thin branch in his hand.

"A stick problem?" Donald asked.

"It's not a stick," Kristoff replied. "Well, it *is* a stick, but it—it's Olaf's arm."

This is Olaf's arm?

Kristoff let out a weary sigh. "He's fallen apart again."

“Uh, how come you’re not upset?” Donald asked uneasily.

“Oh, it’s no big deal. He’s a snowman. We’ll just...put him back together,” Anna said in a reassuring tone.

Would that really be enough? Sora and his friends didn’t seem so certain.

“The pieces can’t be too far from here,” said Kristoff. “Could you guys help us look for ’em?”

“Course!”

The three heroes accepted the task readily and got straight to searching. Unfortunately— “Everything’s all white; I can’t see Olaf anywhere,” Goofy was the first to complain.

How were they supposed to find the parts of a white snowman in a field of white snow?

“Let’s just search everywhere,” Sora suggested, and the three of them got to work. Now that the snowfall had stopped, the sunlight reflecting off the white terrain was almost blinding.

“There’s a big snowball over here!” Donald called.

“That one’s too big!” Sora replied after taking a look.

“It’s so big, you can even ride it!” Goofy hopped on top of the ball and began rolling it around with his feet.

“C’mon, Goofy! This is no time to play around!” Donald scolded, hopping around angrily, but Goofy was having a great time.

“A-hyuck!”

That was when they heard Olaf’s voice. “Oh, I’m so dizzy! The world’s spinning around and around and around!”

Aha, so he was *inside* the snowball!

Goofy rammed the ball into a stone embankment, and the snowman’s head popped right out.

“There you are!” Sora scooped up Olaf’s head from the ground.

“The world’s still spinning...”

This wasn’t going to be enough, though.

Sora and the others ran all over the snowfield carrying Olaf’s very talkative head. “Whoop, careful, now! Gently, please!”

“Now for his body.”

“Wak? I see something weird over there.” Donald rubbed his eyes to be sure, but those lumps of snow were definitely moving around.

“It’s a foot!”

“My foot!”

Sora chased after it, still carrying Olaf’s head. “Can’t you make them stop?”

“Huh, my feet? Maybe... Hey, feet!” Olaf shouted, and the feet came to a halt.

Goofy jumped over and grabbed them. “A-hyuck! Maybe we can just stick ’em on his head.”

“No! This is too low. I need my body!” complained Olaf, who was now just a head on top of a pair of feet. Yeah, it wasn’t a great look for him.

“You help, too, Olaf!”

“Okay!”

Sora and the snowman had just started the search again when Donald called to them from a ways off. “What about this? I think it got kinda dirty rolling around.”

“Pffft, silly! I’m clean and snowy, and that’s a ball of mud.”

“Might still work, though,” commented Goofy as he inspected the clod, much to Sora and Donald’s amusement.

“Nuh-uh!”

“No? Okay then, on to the next!” Sora said brightly to Olaf.

But they didn’t have much luck.

“Do you remember where it fell off?” Sora finally asked.

The armless and bodiless snowman fell into thought. "Hmm..."

"There it is!" Goofy was the one who finally discovered Olaf's body at the base of an iced-over tree.

"Yay! But wait, what about my arms?"

"Anna probably has them. Let's head back!" Sora told him, and then everyone walked back over to her.

"And that should...do it," Anna said with an approving nod as she put the last stick in Olaf.

"You sure something's not missin'?"

"Nah. Looks right," Kristoff said with satisfaction, but Goofy still wasn't so sure.

Yeah, there's definitely something missing.

Now that he was supposedly whole again, Olaf was checking himself over. "Wow, I feel so much better. Wait! Where's my new cute nose? The one Anna gave me!"

"Uh, Sora... Do *you* have his nose?" Anna asked.

Sora and Donald looked to each other for confirmation. "I don't think so."

"Nope, didn't see it."

Meanwhile, Olaf was fixated on the state of his face.

That was when an idea came to Kristoff, and he turned to his reindeer friend. "Sven..."

The reindeer blinked as Kristoff leaned in to look him dead in the eye, and then the jig was up. He opened his mouth, and out popped a big carrot.

"Someone had to pick it up!" Kristoff said in the silly voice he used to speak for Sven. "You're right, buddy. Thanks for finding it...and not actually eating it. 'Aw, you're welcome.'"

While he was busy acting out a conversation between himself and the reindeer, Anna put the carrot back where it belonged on Olaf's face.

“My nose, it’s back! Oh, I love having a nose!” he exclaimed, rubbing it happily.

Actually, I wonder why he came apart in the first place? “Hey, Kristoff,” Sora said, “how’d all this happen, anyway?”

“You know, I’m not sure. These weird animals—well, they were more like monsters—they just crashed into Olaf.”

Monsters? Needless to say, Sora and his friends had a good hunch who those might be.

“The Heartless again!” exclaimed Donald, putting a name to the culprits.

“The ‘Heartless’? Hmm... And I thought the wolves around here were bad.” Kristoff crossed his arms, thinking over the situation, when...

“Kristoff, look!” Anna shouted as she noticed something.

She was pointing at a pack of Heartless a short distance away. They were making a beeline right for them.

“They’re back!” exclaimed Kristoff.

Olaf waved his hands. “No... I’ve already fallen apart today!”

Sora stepped out in front of the three non-combatants and got his Keyblade ready for battle. “We know how to handle them! Anna, Kristoff, keep going!”

“Okay!” answered Kristoff, leading Anna away as Sora and his friends rushed into the fight.

Not long after parting ways with Sora, Donald, and Goofy, Kristoff and Anna arrived at the ice palace.

With Kristoff and Olaf at her side, Anna climbed the staircase so she could speak with Elsa. It was a beautiful castle like nothing she had ever seen before—her big sister had created this magical place.

The quarrel between them had begun when Anna told Elsa she wanted to marry someone. She knew all this had started with her, but Anna never meant for her sister to leave home completely.

Anna asked her companions to stay in the front hall, then ventured deeper

inside alone to find Elsa.

And then...there she was. Anna looked anxiously at her sister. Elsa wouldn't turn around.

"You kind of set off an eternal winter...everywhere," Anna told her haltingly.

Shocked, Elsa finally looked at her. "Everywhere?"

They were indoors, but snow was beginning to fall between them.

"Well, it's okay. You can just unfreeze it," Anna said hopefully, but Elsa only shook her head. The snow was coming down thicker now.

"No, I can't. I don't know how."

"Sure you can. I know you can," Anna continued encouragingly.

Elsa wasn't convinced, though, and the falling snow inside was becoming a storm.

Anna stepped closer to Elsa, but her sister clutched her head in pain. "*I can't!*" she shouted, unintentionally flinging out ice.

The snowfall ceased in an instant as the magic pierced Anna's heart.

A sudden burst of stabbing pain shot through Sora's chest.

When Sora, Donald, and Goofy had arrived at the palace to meet Elsa, they had found Sven at the bottom of the stairs and decided to wait for Anna and the others there.

That's when the pain hit.

"Sora?"

"Are ya hurt?"

Donald and Goofy huddled around Sora when his hand clutched at his chest.

Why does it hurt so bad?

"No, I'm fine. But...I think something terrible must have happened."

Sora looked up at the castle of ice where Anna and Elsa were probably speaking right now.

Ngh, and it still really hurts. I just hope everyone's okay—

The doors of the palace abruptly flew open.

“What?” the three friends cried out in surprise as an enormous snow giant, Marshmallow, came out with Anna and Kristoff in his left hand and Olaf in his right.

“Go away!” Marshmallow rumbled, then hurled Anna and Kristoff away. They slid down the steps and came to rest against a snowdrift. Olaf followed shortly after, in three pieces again.

“Hey! It is not nice to *throw* people!” Anna shouted furiously, winding up to throw a snowball at Marshmallow.

“Whoa-whoa-whoa, feisty-pants,” Kristoff said as he held her back.

“Let me go!”

“Okay, relax. Just calm down. Calm down.”

“Okay! All right! I’m okay.”

“Just let the snowman be.”

“I’m calm.”

“Great.”

Kristoff let go, believing he had calmed Anna down—and that was a mistake. She launched the snowball, and Marshmallow answered with a bellow of rage.

“Aw, see? Now you made him mad.”

“I’ll distract him. You guys go,” Olaf declared courageously, although it was hard to see how he would be much help in pieces. Still, he must have bought at least a little time, because Anna and Kristoff were able to get away safely.

“We’ll take it from here!”

Now it was Sora and his friends’ turn to confront Marshmallow—but the snow giant’s terrifying, thunderous roar overwhelmed them.

Never mind—we gotta run for it!

Sora, Donald, and Goofy headed for the hills at top speed.

Their sprint brought them to the snowy field, where they weaved their way through the trees with Marshmallow hot on their heels. He was much faster than they had imagined.

Well, at least we're doing a good job as decoys. I hope Anna and the others got away—I don't think we'll be so lucky.

"Huh? Where's Goofy?"

"Hey, Sora! I got an idea!"

Sora suddenly realized that somewhere in the middle of their mad dash, Goofy had changed course. He was waving at them from beneath a tree—a tree that had bent all the way to the ground under the weight of the snow piled on top of it.

Donald managed to lose his temper, even while he was running. "Goofy, what are you doing?"

"Over here!"

"Huh? Oh, I get it!" Sora said as he realized what Goofy wanted him to do.

Marshmallow was almost on top of them.

Sora and Donald hurried over to the tree where their friend stood. Goofy took hold of the top of the tree, and it tried to spring back upright again. Sora grabbed onto Goofy and pulled to bend it down again. Marshmallow was almost close enough!

"Get ready...Okay, now!"

Goofy let go, and the tree snapped up and smacked Marshmallow right in the face, knocking the colossal snow monster for a loop. He wouldn't be going anywhere for a bit.

"Oh, yeah!"

Sora and Goofy gave each other a high five, but then Donald butted in between them with his staff. "He's not done..."

Sora and Goofy responded by holding up Keyblade and shield, respectively.

"Bring it, snowball!"

Marshmallow had come back to his senses, ready to threaten Sora and his friends once more. Sora dodged an attack and tumbled through the snow, sending up thick plumes of white powder. The snow giant replied with a blast of icy breath at them.

“Wak!” Donald yelped as he was frozen solid.

“Donald!” Sora shouted, just as the frigid spray turned in his direction. Marshmallow wasn’t a Heartless, but he was still a tough opponent nevertheless. Relief filled Sora once he saw Donald moving again (albeit stiffly) and cast some fire magic at the snow giant.

“Sora, let’s give ’im another bonk on the head!” Goofy called to him from the bottom of another tree bowed over with snow.

“On my way!”

When Marshmallow reared back for a stomp, Sora dashed by underneath his foot and grabbed onto Goofy. They waited for just the right moment, then let go and dealt another blow to Marshmallow’s noggin with the tree.

The snow giant roared—and icy spikes sprouted from his body. He stomped and flailed around the snowfield, laying waste to everything nearby, “Whoa-whoa-whoa!”

Sora and Goofy frantically ran this way and that and finally hid behind a boulder. Donald hurried over to join them.

Marshmallow stopped his rampage to hunt for his three targets.

“Now!” cried Sora as he jumped out of cover, but the snow giant had a blast of ice breath ready for him. Sora just barely managed to dodge it, but Marshmallow kept on the attack.

Gasping for breath, Sora, Donald, and Goofy glared at the snowy goliath. He was gradually forcing them farther and farther back toward the precipice behind them. They had to do something— But then Marshmallow slammed his arms into the ground, filling the air with powdered snow.

And that was when they realized the ground itself beneath them was crumbling.

“Uh-ohhh!”

“Gwawawaaaak!”

“Yaaa-hoo-hoo-hoo-hooey!”

The trio yelled as they plummeted down headfirst.

“Good thing snow’s so soft. We could do this a hundred times,” Sora mumbled, sprawled out in a daze.

“No! Let’s not,” Donald quacked irritably as he shook the snow off.

As always, Goofy took everything in stride. “Ya sure you don’t wanna go again?”

Sora huffed out a big sigh and clambered to his feet. “Nooo, thank you!”

They looked around, but there was no sign of Marshmallow.

“Do you think everybody else made it?”

I certainly hope so.

Goofy and Donald were thinking the same thing.

“I don’t think the snow monster got ’em.”

“They probably went back to the palace.”

They can knock us down to the bottom all they want; we’ll still try to help Anna and Elsa. I’m sure it’s the same for them—they still care about each other, too, even after everything. “Makes sense. For us, too. We still need to talk to Elsa.” *So maybe we’ve never managed to stay at the top of the mountain for very long, but whatever!* “Back to the ice palace!” Sora declared, steeling himself for what would be their third trip to Elsa’s castle.

I’m getting used to trekking through these snowy mountains, and the slopes are kinda fun to slide down. I think I’ve had enough of falling off the top, though.

Once they reached the snowfield, Sora spied someone in the distance. “Is that Elsa...?” He peered more closely and saw a man carrying the limp form of a woman over his shoulder—a woman who looked like the queen. “Who’s that guy?”

Something wasn't right, here. Sora had never seen this man before; he was nothing like Kristoff.

"Do ya think someone from the castle came to escort her home?" Goofy proposed.

Sora got the feeling that was only half right.

"That doesn't look like an escort job to me."

Yeah, if she was going back home willingly, she wouldn't be unconscious.

The three of them took another hard look.

"Wak, get a load of that!" Donald cried

A dark mist was emanating from the man's body.

"Darkness?" Goofy asked with a grim expression.

Sora set his lips in a firm line. "We have to go after them!"

Sora, Donald, and Goofy tried to catch up, but the man was surprisingly quick. They couldn't seem to gain any ground.

Just as Sora was starting to panic a little, Marshmallow appeared again in a plume of snow.

Everyone prepared for a fight, but oddly enough, the giant snowman passed right by as if he couldn't see them at all. He seemed to have his sights set on something else.

"Hey! You'd better not have hurt our friends!" Sora shouted, but Marshmallow ignored him and kept on walking.

"Elsaaa!" the giant bellowed.

Sora called after Marshmallow. "Hey, wait up! Are you looking for Elsa, too?"

The snow giant came to a halt and raised his arms in a threatening manner, and Sora realized his guess was right.

"Whoa! Eeeasy! Do you wanna save her from the bad guy? We're on the same side," Sora said. Marshmallow lowered his arms, and his expression turned to something sad. The colossal snowman sighed her name dejectedly.

“Elsa...”

“I guess all he ever wanted to do was keep Elsa safe,” Goofy surmised.

Yeah, I bet he’s right.

Marshmallow had thrown Anna and the others out of the castle, then chased down Sora and his friends just to keep Elsa away from harm.

Sora took a deep breath and called out to him. “Hey. We should team up, big guy.”

Marshmallow nodded slowly.

“Team up?!” Donald quacked in protest. He wasn’t a fan of the idea; after all, they had been enemies until just recently, and their second fall off a cliff was Marshmallow’s fault.

Sora was not about to be dissuaded, though. “C’mon,” he chided. “We wanna help her, too. Why not?” He looked up at Marshmallow. “So, whaddaya say?”

This time, the giant snowman’s nod was much more enthusiastic, and with that, the four of them set off as a team.

“Sora!”

Donald still wasn’t convinced, so Goofy ambled over to him. “One great thing about Sora—he can always make friends with anybody,” he whispered.

“Yippee...” Donald sighed with a smile, accepting that he’d lost this round.

“Donald! Goofy! C’mon.”

The two of them hurried off after Sora.

Since they were buddies with Marshmallow now, their new recruit gave them a ride on his big shoulders.

“What an amazing view!” Sora stood up and surveyed the gorgeous snow-covered vista.

“This is no time for sightseeing! We’ve got to catch up to Elsa!” Donald snapped in an attempt to hurry them up.

“We know that, don’t we?” Sora said to Marshmallow, who nodded and

began to pick up the pace.

Soon enough they heard a voice. "Stop it. Put me down!"

That's Kristoff. We finally found them! But what about Anna?

"Do me a favor and wait here. If you come along, Kristoff might freak out."

Marshmallow lowered everyone to the ground as Sora asked.

"No, Sven! We're not going back. She's with her true love."

Sora, Donald, and Goofy came running up to Kristoff and Sven and found them arguing about something. Was Sven trying to get Kristoff to go somewhere? The reindeer kept butting up against him.

"Kristoff!"

"Sora."

"You all right?"

The quarrel briefly ended as Sora walked over.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm glad you guys are safe."

"Where'd Anna go?" Sora asked.

She should've been with them, but there was no sign of her. Sven lowered his head sadly.

"She's back at home."

"Something happen?"

The pain on Kristoff's face remained as he answered. "Anna was struck in the heart by Elsa's ice magic. If the ice isn't removed, she'll freeze forever. Only an act of true love can thaw a frozen heart. So I took her back to Arendelle and her true love, Hans."

True love...? Hans...? What's going on here?

Confused, Sora asked the first question that popped into his head straight out. "But...what about you?"

Kristoff answered Sora's question with one of his own. "What *about* me?"

“Uh, I sorta assumed you guys were...”

“Nooo! I just keep her from getting lost.”

“Really? Oh, but you seem so...”

The two of them were both surprised, so Goofy finished the sentence. “Perfect together!”

“Yeah, like me and Daisy!” Donald added. Daisy was his girlfriend back at Disney Castle.

As Kristoff’s face flushed bright red with embarrassment, a powerful gust of snowy wind howled by.

“What?”

Kristoff raised his head and looked down the mountain at Arendelle Castle, where the blizzard was coming from.

What was going on down there...?

“Anna,” he murmured, then took off running. Sven hurried after him.

Marshmallow arrived next to the trio, who were still a little stunned.

“Elsa...,” the snow giant grunted, a finger pointed at Arendelle.

“Is that where Elsa is?”

Marshmallow answered with a roar.

So Elsa’s at the castle—! Sora looked toward Arendelle, then set off at a run. “Let’s go!”

Donald, Goofy, and Marshmallow followed him into the swirling headwind.

The four of them tried to slide down the slope all the way to Arendelle, but the snow and wind was getting worse. They tried making their way forward one step at a time, but that didn’t go as planned, either. What’s worse, the snow was beginning to sting.

They were almost out of ideas when Marshmallow stepped to the front to shield the others from the elements. That made things a little easier.

“Thanks.”

The giant snowman roared. *Still, this blizzard isn't stopping. Actually, it's getting worse. We've got to hurry.*

The sea around Arendelle was frozen solid. Several ships were moored there, stuck fast in the ice at odd angles.

Anna trudged weakly across the icy surface, fingertips trembling slightly, and each breath left her mouth in a cold white cloud. She was about to freeze solid herself.

That was how Kristoff found her.

“Anna!”

Hearing her name, she realized who had come. “Kristoff...”

He ran toward her, but she heard the soft *shing* of a sword leaving its sheath. A man was about to strike down her sister—a man named Hans.

Anna gave another wistful look at Kristoff, running desperately to save her, then turned away from him and rushed toward Elsa.

Hans's sword slashed down, but just before the blow landed, Anna leaped between them to protect her sister, her right hand outstretched.

“Nooo!” Anna screamed—her last word as she turned to ice. Just as her fingertips froze, the blade shattered on contact with her hand, and the shock sent Hans hurtling back.

“Anna...”

When they finally arrived, Sora, Donald, and Goofy spotted the statue of ice that had once been Anna.

We were too late...!

Hans lay unconscious on the frozen sea, and a pitch-black shadow swirled up from around his body, flowing around Sora and his friends until it had completely swallowed them.

When they opened their eyes, they were face-to-face with a Heartless in the form of an enormous white wolf—Sköll.

Sora readied his Keyblade, while Goofy raised his shield. “Do ya really think

this will help Anna?" he asked.

"I don't know...but we'd better try something!" Sora replied with a steely glare at their foe.

"Let's get it!" Donald shouted.

That was when an unexpected ally appeared behind the trio with a mighty bellow—Marshmallow had apparently come to aid them in the battle.

The snow giant quickly picked up Sora and placed him on his back, and the two of them went after Sköll together.

The wolf Heartless raked Marshmallow with its sharp claws, but the giant snowman didn't even flinch. Instead, he brought down his arms like hammers, stunning Sköll.

Donald used the opening to fire off spells, while Goofy rammed it with his shield. Sora leaped off Marshmallow and brought his Keyblade down on the Heartless.

Sköll howled and whirled its tail around, and Sora went on the defensive, flinging himself out of the way.

"We've got more company!" warned Goofy.

Sora looked up to see several smaller Heartless that looked like smaller, autonomous versions of Sköll's head.

"Leave these guys to me!" Donald shouted as he intercepted the new arrivals. Marshmallow joined in, too, and the two of them took care of the Wolf Heads while Sora focused on Sköll.

The Heartless let out yet another howl, warning Sora to lower his center of gravity into a defensive stance and brace for another ferocious tail attack. But instead, the wolf leaped high into the air and transformed into a gigantic black orb. Inky drops poured from its surface.

Marshmallow came and stood over Sora to shield him as the dark sun came crashing down like the sky itself. The black rain was still falling all around them.

"Gwoooooorh!"

Marshmallow took the full brunt of the attack with an ear-shattering roar.

“You got this!” Sora shouted, cheering him on as he whirled his Keyblade to wound Sköll. “Come on...!” Finally, he broke through!

The vicious barrage ended as the Heartless turned back into its wolf form and glared menacingly at its foes.

With its last bit of strength, Sköll turned back into a black sphere, rose into the air, and exploded with a dark flash.

Marshmallow planted himself in front of Sora, Donald, and Goofy, protecting them from that final attack, but it was too much even for him. As the blast knocked all four of them away, the shadows dispersed with a gust of wind.

The next thing Sora knew, he was back. But here, even time itself seemed to be frozen.

All he could hear was Elsa sobbing as she clung to the icy form of her sister. Kristoff, Sven, and Olaf stood watching over her, unable to do anything else.

Elsa sobbed and sobbed—and then, a miracle occurred.

Anna began to thaw, bit by bit, in her sister’s arms.

Olaf was the first to notice, a huge grin spreading on his face.

Then Sven nudged Kristoff, urging him to look up. When he finally raised his head, his face lit up with hope.



Sora, Goofy, and Donald all held their breath, too. Everything was going to be okay!

“Anna! Elsa!” they shouted as they ran toward the sisters, until dark shadows caught them once again.

This wasn’t the same as last time, however. Sora, Donald, and Goofy were trapped within a black dome, and outside it, time came to a halt.

The one who stepped out of the darkness to confront them was Larxene.

“So, love has filled *both* their hearts with light,” she remarked, watching the two sisters, and then turned away. “Two in one world... Definitely didn’t see that coming.”

“First Marluxia, now you. What’s this all about?!” Sora asked as he stepped closer to Larxene. He couldn’t hide how frustrated he was.

“Oh, I see, so you bumped into Marluxia. Then why am I explaining this again? I told you before: the New Seven Hearts. If you mess up and don’t find your seven guardians of light, we’re gonna need another group to fall back on.”

“Leave innocent people out of it!”

What does Organization XIII even plan to accomplish by dragging Anna, Elsa, and Rapunzel into their little schemes? Sora was furious with them.

“Ohh, look at this tough guy. Such a big boy now. Well, maybe you should do your job, and find the other guardians of light,” Larxene taunted as she leaned forward and pointed at Sora.

This is getting so old! Quit bossing me around and ragging on me! “Please, like you’ve found your thirteen. The king said you’re one seeker of darkness short,” he retorted, remembering what Mickey had told them when he returned from the Sleeping Worlds. Even the true Organization XIII should be missing a member.

But Larxene’s mouth curled into a sneer. “Oh no, we’re set.”

“Huh?” he gasped. He wasn’t expecting that.

Larxene ignored him and vanished in a shroud of darkness without another

word. The dome imprisoning them faded away, too.

“They have all thirteen?” Sora said to himself. “Then if we don’t find our seven, they’ll go after Elsa and Anna.”

The sisters were hugging each other joyfully after overcoming their many hardships.

Goofy and Donald walked over to the anxious Sora.

“It’ll be okay. They’re strong.”

“And now, it’s our turn!”

His two friends had stuck by him through thick and thin; they knew what they were talking about. “You’re right,” Sora said as he looked at the sisters. “They have each other.”

“Anna...”

“Oh, Elsa.”

The two embraced, reassured by each other’s safety.

“You sacrificed yourself for me?” Elsa took her younger sister’s hands in her own.

“I love you.” Anna returned Elsa’s gaze.

“An act of true love will thaw a frozen heart,” said Olaf in awe from off on the side.

“Love...will thaw. Love...,” Elsa repeated, then smiled as the pieces came together.

“Elsa?” Anna gave her a curious look.

“Of course. Love!” Elsa beamed at Anna, at her little sister who loved her more than she loved anyone else, and spread her arms wide.

What came from her hands this time was a warm breeze, which began to melt the ice.

The ice danced glittering and twinkling into the air, clearing the skies and thawing the frozen kingdom until it was restored in all its lush, verdant glory.

“Yes!” Sora, Donald, and Goofy cheered at the sight of Elsa and Anna standing side by side.

This world is gonna be just fine!

C’mon, guys. It’s time to go.

“Sorry we’re late.”

After Riku and Mickey had called them back to the Mysterious Tower, Sora, Donald, and Goofy had rushed straight over from Arendelle.

“It’s okay. You got here as fast as you could.” Mickey was already waiting for them there, with Riku right next to him.

The five of them and Yen Sid were happy to see one another again, but Sora got right down to business. “The Organization claims to have their thirteen darkneses.”

“Do we believe it’s true?” Mickey asked thoughtfully.

“Umm...I don’t know, but there’s something else they keep mentioning. They’re after a ‘New Seven Hearts,’ which seems to be code for ‘let’s go bother more princesses.’”

“Well, as the original princesses of hearts’ time for protecting the pure light has ended, they have passed the light to others. Our enemy must certainly be cognizant of this. If the ‘New Seven Hearts’ is what they wish to call it, then so be it,” Yen Sid added upon hearing Sora’s report.

Seven new princesses. He had met Rapunzel, Anna, and Elsa—

“But Kairi hasn’t passed on her power. Is she one of the new seven?” Sora asked uneasily.

“She must be. But still, she chose to wield a Keyblade and fight on with us as one of the guardians of light,” replied the king.

Kairi was currently training with Axel.

“Yeah...”

Kairi was both a princess and a guardian. The fact that she could use a

Keyblade was reassuring, but with the way things were going, there was no telling when the Organization might choose to go after her.

While Sora was thinking to himself, Donald spoke up apologetically. “We haven’t found Terra yet.”

“Hey, at least we’ve tracked down Ventus. Vanitas told us that he’s in Sora’s heart,” Goofy said, informing the others about one of the discoveries they had made on their journey.

“And so did Ansem the Wise in his data, so it almost certainly must be true,” Jiminy chimed in.

While Ventus’s name was the only one mentioned in Ansem’s data, this finding could join with the other things they knew to bring them closer to the truth.

Mickey seemed pleased. “That’s great!” he said to Sora. “Now we can save Ven.”

“Maybe, except Aqua’s the only one who knows where he’s hidden,” Riku reminded them gravely. “We still have to find her first.”

Sora opened his mouth. “I’ll go,” he declared firmly.

Donald and Goofy shared a worried glance.

I’ll go. I have to save Aqua. But this feeling—does it come from Ventus?

“Is that wise?” Mickey asked uncertainly, but Yen Sid had the real question.

“You need the power of waking, Sora. Do you have it?”

“Uh...no? Probably not.” Sora looked at the floor, confused by his own heart.

“Without that power, you are not ready to face the realm of darkness,” the sorcerer told him sternly with a shake of his head.

“C’mon...”

Sora refused to back down. He may not have the power back, but he was well aware of how dangerous the realm of darkness was. Plus, his heart was calling out to him, telling him he had to help Aqua.

And then Riku let out a laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Sora asked him, visibly annoyed.

“Sorry. Master Yen Sid knows you a little too well. He said you’d try to stage a half-baked rescue,” Riku explained, still grinning.

Donald, Goofy, Jiminy, and Mickey all started laughing, too. Everyone knew how Sora was.

“Yeah! Laugh it up!”

Sora’s face fell, but then Riku continued, gentler this time. “Sora, I know you’re volunteering because you’re worried about me and Mickey.”

“Yeah...”

Riku laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Well, thanks. But the power of waking’s important. You can come to the rescue once you’ve got that. Sound fair?”

“Yeah. All right,” Sora replied, finally accepting what Riku was trying to say. *I’m sure Ventus will understand, too. This just isn’t the right time.* “But be safe. No reckless stunts,” he said, looking up at him.

Riku answered with a firm nod. “Yes, sir.”

The other three had been watching this exchange from a little bit away and started whispering among themselves.

“*Sora’s the reckless one.*”

“No, not exactly. He just doesn’t think.”

“If only he listened to Master Yen Sid the way he listens to Riku. That would be a good start.”

As Sora’s constant companions on his adventures, Donald, Jiminy, and Goofy knew him all too well.

“I’m listening now!” Sora warned them, turning around.

After everyone had a good laugh, Yen Sid looked over the assembled team and issued instructions. “Very good. Sora will continue his journey to build his powers, while Mickey and Riku will focus on the search for Aqua.”

“Yes, sir!” they all answered, their hearts and voices as one.

In the barren wasteland, dust swirled through the air amid thirteen stone columns.

“So, why are you back?” Marluxia asked.

“Nice way to greet your old partner in crime,” Larxene retorted, but Marluxia only laughed. “So, why do you think the old geezer took us back? He must know we backstabbed the Organization while Xemnas was running it.” Back in Castle Oblivion, Marluxia and Larxene had betrayed the Organization, but they were vanquished before they could realize their ambitions.

Marluxia calmly explained. “Xehanort doesn’t care about you or me. To him, we’re nothing but empty husks. The old Organization was the same. Xehanort needs thirteen vessels to hold his essence.”

“Husks? Not me,” Larxene complained. She never was good at taking orders. “You up for another coup?”

“Oh, please,” said a third voice. “You couldn’t do it last time. You gotta play it smart, like me.” Marluxia turned to see Demyx, the former number nine, standing on the next pillar over with a sitar in his hands.

“What?! You’re not smart!” snapped Larxene, slightly startled.

“Well, you heard what Marly said. I don’t have to be smart.” Demyx had always been known as a slacker since the days of the old Organization. He even had a nickname for Marluxia.

“Or capable, or likeable, or attractive. A cereal bowl would make a better vessel,” Larxene snapped, jabbing a finger in his direction.

But he didn’t seem to care; he just merely stopped playing his sitar for a moment to scratch his nose. “Whoa now, you are *way* out of line. I am extremely imposing...when I want to be. Which is, admittedly, almost never.”

Larxene still wasn’t having it. “Why haven’t you gone to any worlds? Are you slacking?”

“Course not. I got benched,” Demyx admitted coolly.

“Huh?”

Marluxia joined the conversation between them. “Saïx brought Vexen on

board. They must be planning to use Replicas.”

“Those windup toys?” Larxene looked disgusted by the idea. In her opinion, the plan with the Riku Replica at Castle Oblivion was a total bust.

“Oh, no. The Replicas are way more real than you remember,” said Demyx. “I mean, one stole my spot!”

Larxene burst out laughing. He was worse than a Replica? “Of course it stole your spot. You’re dumb as a brick.”

“Har-dee-har,” Demyx muttered in a voice too soft to hear over Larxene’s cackling.

“Vexen’s latest Replicas are no mere puppets. The Riku Replica we used in Castle Oblivion was just a prototype. The next Replica, the one crafted from Sora’s memories, was real enough to join our ranks. And Vexen claims the new ones will be human in every way. If he ever finishes them.”

“Oh... The thing is...I kinda told Sora and his nitwits that we’re ready. My bad.”

Larxene had a tendency toward impulsive behavior—just like Demyx, actually.

Then a fourth member joined the meeting. “Let them believe as much,” a voice commanded as another Corridor of Darkness opened on a pillar.

“Ugh. Xemnas,” Larxene remarked with unbridled disgust.

Xemnas ignored her and kept on speaking. “If they think that we have all thirteen darknesses, then they will panic. And panic leads to a lack of preparation.”

“Yeah, totally.” It was hard to tell whether Demyx actually agreed, but he was clearly uninvested either way.

“Why is this thing a member again?” Larxene asked, aiming a finger at him again.

“Hey now! Pointing is rude,” Demyx retorted, still strumming his sitar.

“The first six members of the original Organization were all apprentices to Ansem the Wise, and the seventh and eighth members joined thereafter. The thirteenth member was Roxas, a Keyblade wielder. So. How about you? How do

you suppose I chose numbers nine through twelve?”

Numbers VII and VIII were Saïx and Axel, respectively. Numbers IX through XII were, in order, Demyx, Luxord, Marluxia, and Larxene.

“Because our hearts are über powerful,” Larxene offered.

Xemnas shook his head. “Wrong. You have been brought together for another purpose.”

“What? So that we can rot away on the bottom rung?” The reply came from the darkness gathering on top of another, unoccupied pillar, and Luxord stepped out.

“You’re in, too? What is this, Organization Rehash?” Larxene said, rolling her eyes at the whole situation.

“I happen to play an important role. No one ‘benched’ me,” Luxord informed her.

“You were listening? So not cool,” commented Demyx as he tuned his sitar.

“One must hold one’s cards as long as necessary,” Luxord replied confidently. He closed his eyes for a moment.

But Larxene challenged him to show his hand. “What ‘important role’? That stupid box that Xigbar claims is real but won’t tell us a thing about?”

“You’ll just have to ask Xigbar about that. Now, then... Xemnas, what is this ‘purpose’? You didn’t invite us back for old times’ sake,” Luxord said, deftly playing with his cards.

“You four are going to reveal your greatest secret: the ancient Keyblade legacy that slumbers within you.”

All four of them gave Xemnas their attention.

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